Hollywood's "Forgotten" Romance With Lone Pine, California

JULY/AUGUST 1986

Sierra Life

THE MAGAZINE OF THE HIGH SIERRA

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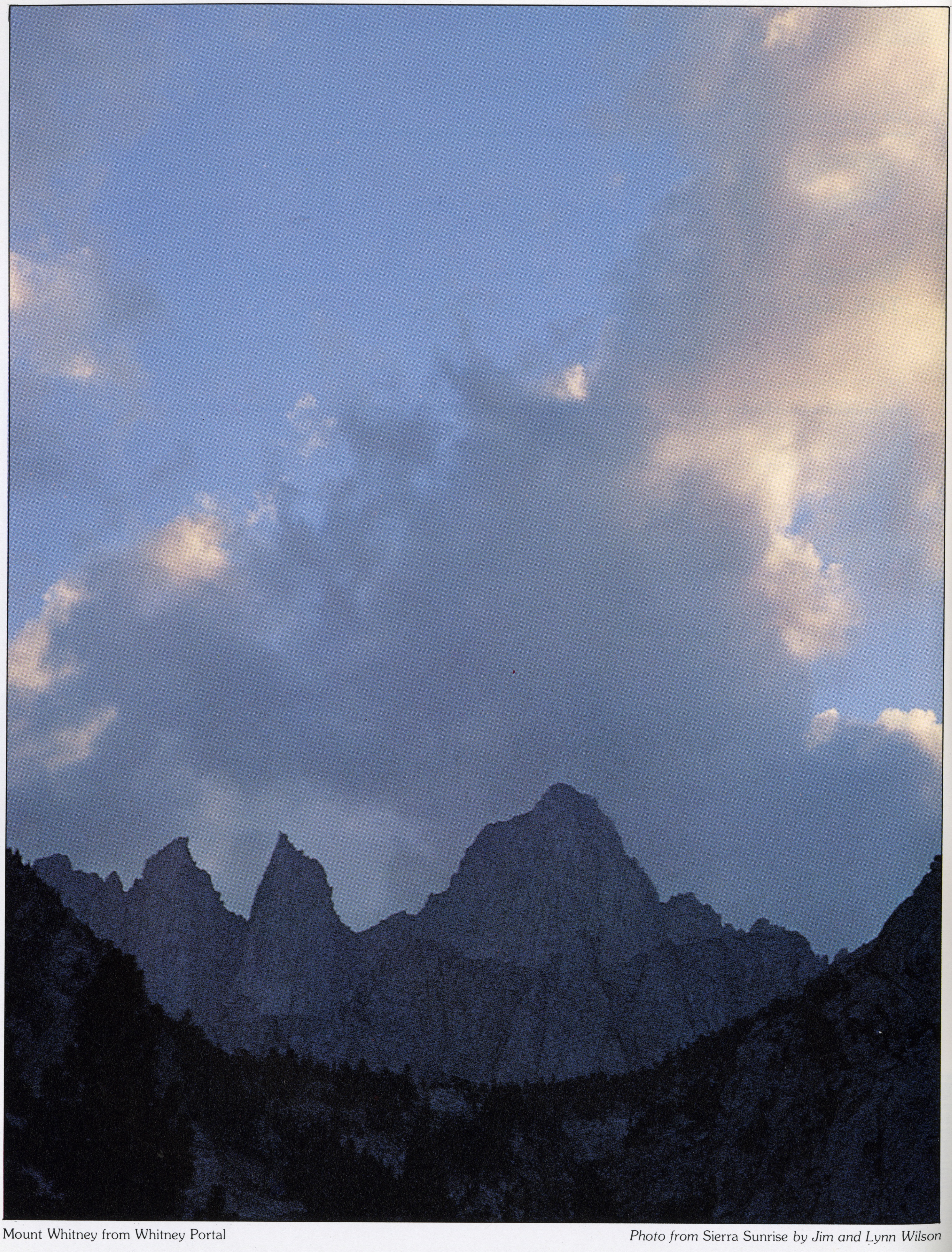

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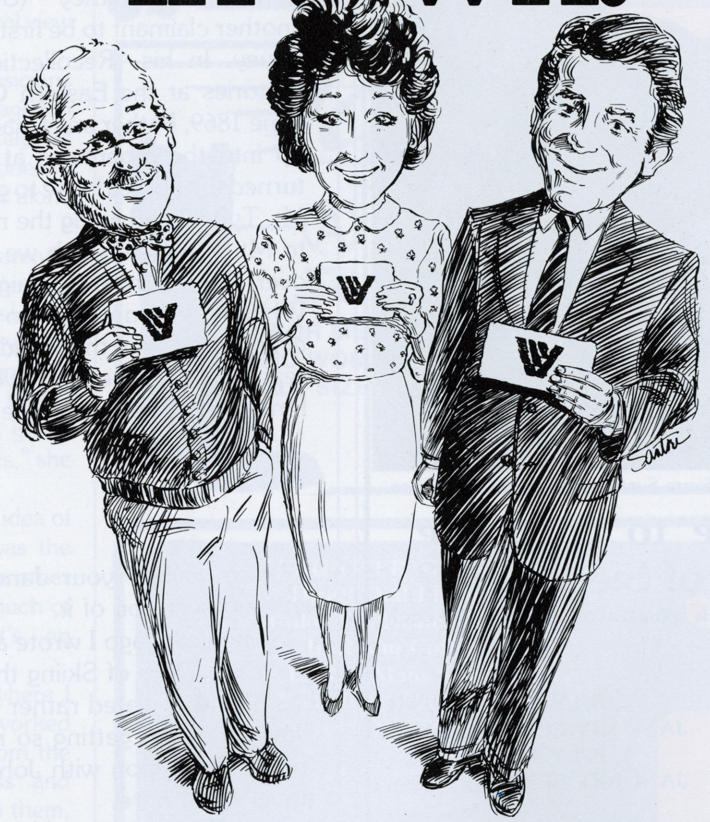

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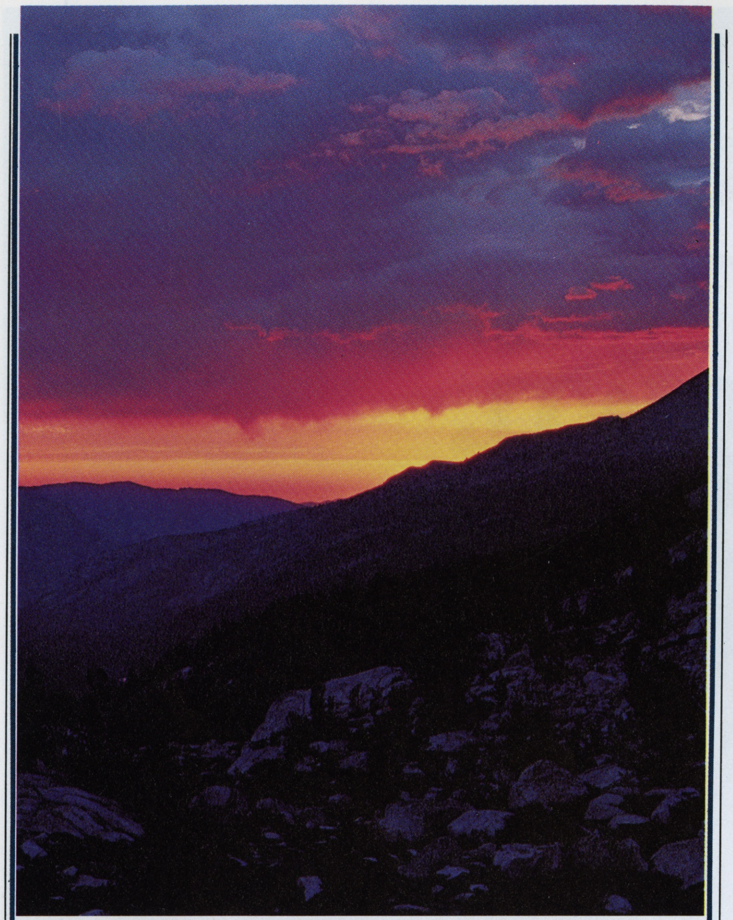

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Letters to the Editor

As a transplanted (homesick) Californian I really enjoy your magazine—daydreaming about places we've climbed and hopefully will again return to. The Virgin Islands may have climate, beautiful warm waters, etc. . . but we sure miss the mountains! Looking forward to reading future issues.

B.R. Johnston
St. Thomas, Virgin Islands

I certainly enjoyed Martha Voght's article, "Race to Climb Mt. Whitney" (Sierra Life, Jan/Feb '86). Still another claimant to be first to climb Mt. Whitney is John A. Shuey. In his "Recollections" filed with Pioneer Family Histories at the Eastern California Museum he tells: "In June 1869, Father and I made a trip as far as horses could go up into the mountains at foot of Mt. Tyndal. There we turned the horses loose to go home and we climbed to top of Mt. Tyndal and along the ridge south, crossing many cliffs, to Mt. Whitney which we scaled to its top after climbing over 100 feet nearly straight up on the north east side of Whitney. When we got to top we saw no signs of anyone ever having been there and I believe that we were the first to reach the extreme top. Two years later I went up from Lone Pine with a group of three. . . "

Polly Connable
Independence, Ca

I was loaned your January/February '86 edition and enjoyed every bit of it.

Some years ago I wrote a long article for the local paper on "Early Days of Skiing the High Sierra." The tear sheet has been circulated rather widely in this area. Glad to see Dave (McCoy) getting so much ink. He first came down from Washington with John Logan—now a resident and travel agent here.

In re Whitney—good background. But once when I had just flown in to Bishop, my altimeter showed the White Mountain Peak to be higher than Whitney. This they confirmed but said the difference was small and Whitney had all the publicity.

C.L. Scott, M.D.
Laguna Hills, CA

After devouring the January/February issue, I am *totally* impressed with Sierra Life. The photography and articles are superb. In addition, the ads are restrained and in good taste.

I live and play in the Sierras; Yosemite is in my "back yard," and the East side is still on my "north forty." You have *really* captured my interests and my heart.

Sharon Giacomazzi
Midpines, CA

Editor's Corner

MAMAS, DON'T LET YOUR BABIES GROW UP TO BE MUSICIANS

Musicians get no respect. George Bernard Shaw once recommended that a certain class of musicians in London be placed "outside the protection of the law, so that any citizen may assail them with sticks, knives, pistols or bombs, without incurring any penalties." That may be an exaggeration, but it sometimes doesn't seem so far removed from the general view toward musicians in this country.

I know about the plight of musicians because, for many years, I was engaged in that profession. As a career, it definitely has serious drawbacks. For one thing, it doesn't pay as well as most casual labor, let alone other professions or careers.

Maybe that's because people apparently think that a person chooses a career in music because they are basically unemployable. Recently, while on my way to the post office to mail off several copies of this magazine, I ran into a friend I hadn't seen since my musician days. "Oh great! You found a job delivering magazines," she said in a congratulatory tone.

My father never could accept the idea of my being a musician. To him, it was the same as being a pickpocket or some other kind of derelict. He doesn't think much of writing, either, but at least it's an improvement.

I can remember job interviews where I had written in my resume that I had worked for several years as a musician. From the interviewers' looks of nervousness and disdain, I eventually realized that to them, having been engaged in that profession was bad enough, but admitting it showed that I had no sense of decorum whatsoever.

Many musicians don't mind these perceptions, and some actually cultivate them. The fact is that a number of musicians I've known over the years were pretty much normal. They played golf and voted. Some even had car insurance.

For most in the profession, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. For many, there is no alternative nearly as fulfilling. But even the most dedicated usually keep in mind an old musician's maxim: "Don't quit your day job."

Marty Forstenzer

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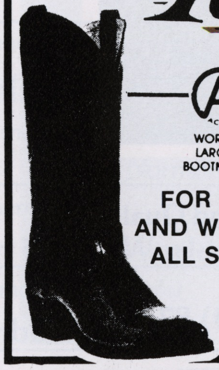

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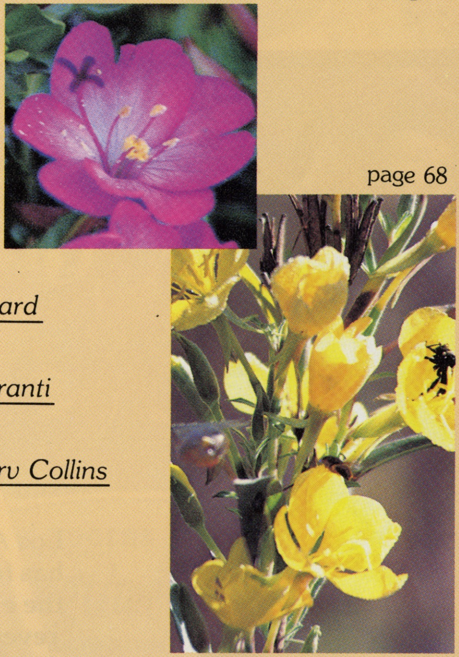

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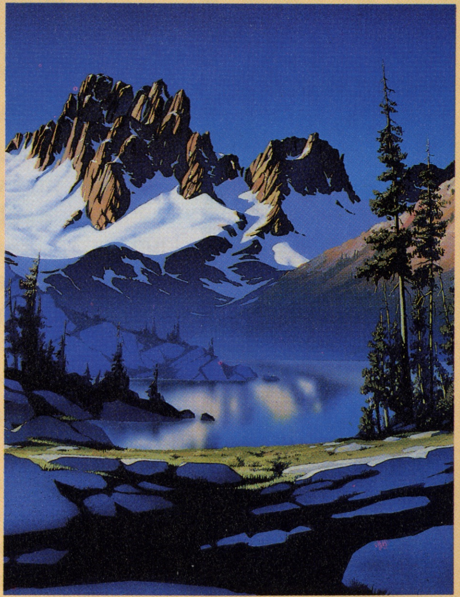

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Our Cover: From the lobby card for the film, *Secret of the Wastelands*, filmed in the Sierra.

Clayton Moore
Buck Jones & Silver
John Wayne

THEY WENT THATAWAY

By Jim Mitchell

> It seems like only yesterday, we rode the range together,
> Prairie sky and tumbleweeds, as far as we could see,
> Then you grew up and drifted on, but I know you remember,
> When you were a saddle pal to Hoppy, Gene and me
>
> *Sung by Roy Rogers*

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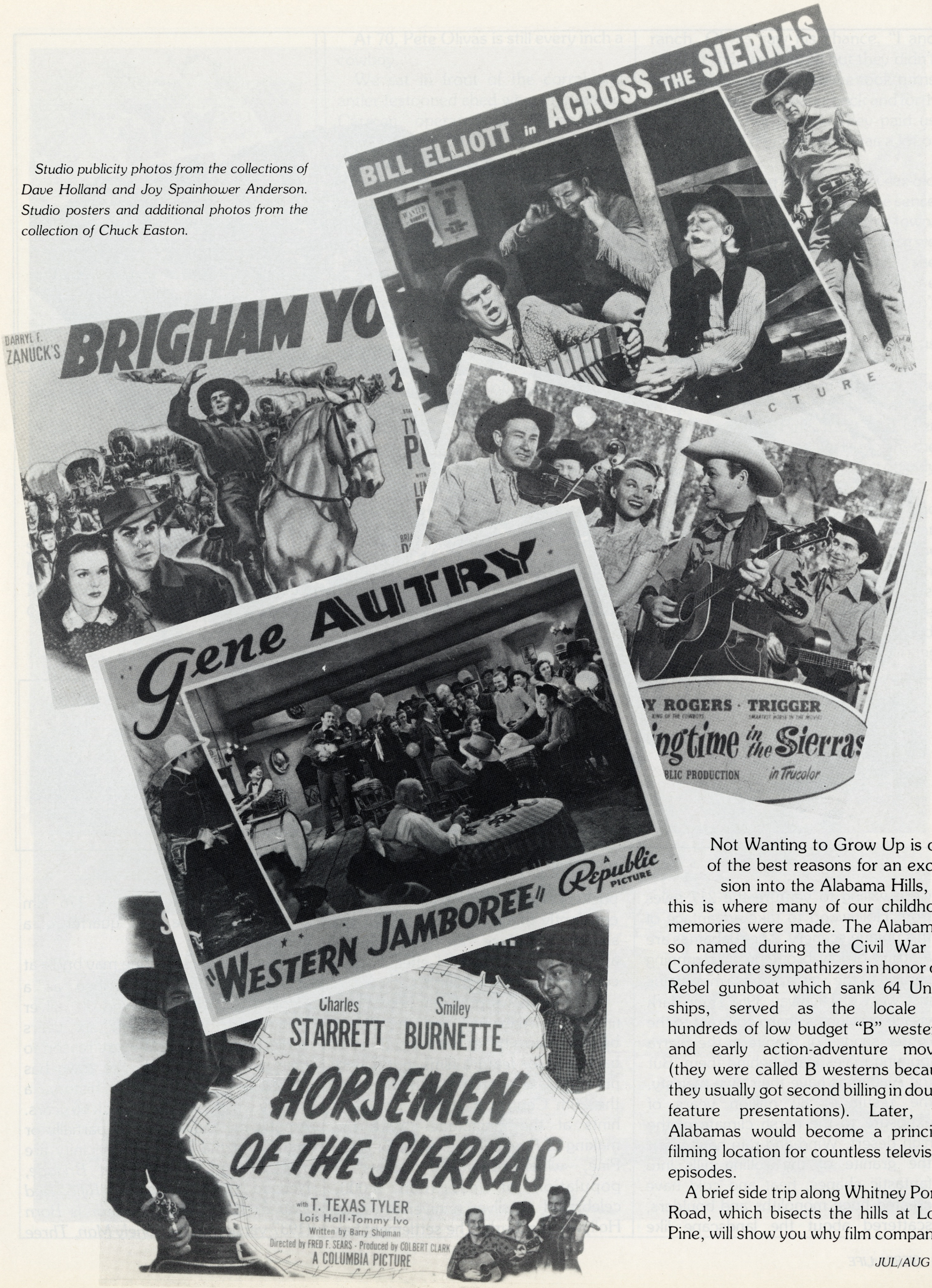
A light rain was falling over the Alabama Hills west of Lone Pine, California as we trudged along a narrow, boulder-lined canyon near Whitney Portal Road. Dave Holland, a Los Angeles film buff, was making his annual pilgrimage into the Alabamas, as he has for the past ten years. Armed with studio publicity photos, we were looking for the exact spots where movie history was made. Midway up the canyon, we paused reverently in a small clearing where a group of Texas lawmen was "ambushed" during the filming of a 1937 western serial thriller. The sole survivor of that attack went on to become known as *The Lone Ranger*. Deeper into the gorge, we marveled at the skill of a stagecoach driver who had whipped his galloping horses between these same rocks for a 1952 film, *Hangman's Knot*, starring Randolph Scott.

By then, the rain had become a steady downpour.

Suddenly, Holland began jumping and shouting like a lottery contestant who just watched the bouncing ball drop into the Grand Prize slot. "Oh, my God," he exclaimed, "look up there! It's the Cooper Rock!" For years, Holland had been searching for the granite outcropping Gary Cooper had used for refuge from turbanned bandits in a publicity photo for the 1934 Paramount classic, *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*. A member of our search party, Lone Pine restaurant owner Curt Herring, scampered up the slope and gleefully assumed Cooper's pose while Bill Shelton, the expedition's official photographer, snapped away.

Afterward, we huddled together against the windblown sheets of rain to plan our next move. Should we find the route taken by Tyrone Power in *King of the Khyber Rifles*, or search for the spot where a Hindu Temple was built for the 1939 epic, *Gunga Din*? Holland pondered the choices for a moment while icy rainwater dripped from the end of his nose. "The real question, gentlemen," he said with mock seriousness, "is, what are we going to do when we grow up?"

Studio publicity photos from the collections of Dave Holland and Joy Spainhower Anderson. Studio posters and additional photos from the collection of Chuck Easton.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A COLUMBIA PICTURE

Not Wanting to Grow Up is one of the best reasons for an excursion into the Alabama Hills, for this is where many of our childhood memories were made. The Alabamas, so named during the Civil War by Confederate sympathizers in honor of a Rebel gunboat which sank 64 Union ships, served as the locale for hundreds of low budget "B" westerns and early action-adventure movies (they were called B westerns because they usually got second billing in double feature presentations). Later, the Alabamas would become a principal filming location for countless television episodes.

A brief side trip along Whitney Portal Road, which bisects the hills at Lone Pine, will show you why film companies

Frank Faylen prepares to stop a stage in *The Outlanders.*

were willing to venture the 217 miles from Hollywood to take advantage of this unique scenery. The Alabamas are a string of low brooding hills running parallel to the Sierra Nevada mountains just west of Highway 395. Their dark visage provides a sharp contrast to the lighter shades of granite in the Sierra looming majestically behind them. But the Alabamas have their own majesty, the result of 80 million years of exposure to the harsh climate of the high desert. Wind and rain have worn the granite of the rolling hills into fantastic shapes; heat and cold have created huge monoliths and boulders, scattered about the landscape like pockets of geological loose change. The constantly shifting patterns of light and shadow produce an other-worldly appearance no "special effects" man could ever hope to match.

No one knows precisely how many times the Alabamas and the Sierra behind them have been used as a backdrop for feature films, but a 1951 press release, written for the debut of the 20th Century Fox film, *Rawhide*, hints at the magnitude: "With the making of *Rawhide* the village of Lone Pine, which ordinarily boasts a population of less than 2,000, celebrated its silver anniversary as a Hollywood suburb. The settlement has played host to a total of 176 film companies in the past quarter of a century."

Residents of Lone Pine may bridle at seeing their town described as a "Hollywood suburb" (and its silver anniversary was actually six years earlier), but they have every reason to take pride in the role the town has played in American film history, a history which now dates back 66 years. Among the movies filmed partially or entirely in the Lone Pine vicinity are *The Charge of the Light Brigade, Nevada Smith, Springfield Rifle, Bad Day at Black Rock, A Star is Born* (1937 version), *The Lonely Man, Three*

Russ Spainhower, rarely seen without a cigar, jokes with John Wayne on the set of *Tycoon* (above). With the Alabama Hills and the Sierra as a backdrop, a film crew gets an action closeup for *How the West Was Won* (below).

Faces West, and *The Great Race.* Stars who filmed on location near the town include Gregory Peck, James Stewart, Richard Widmark, Edward G. Robinson, Rita Hayworth, Steve McQueen, Barbara Stanwyck, and Glenn Ford, to name only a few.

* * *

At 70, Pete Olivas is still every inch a cowboy.

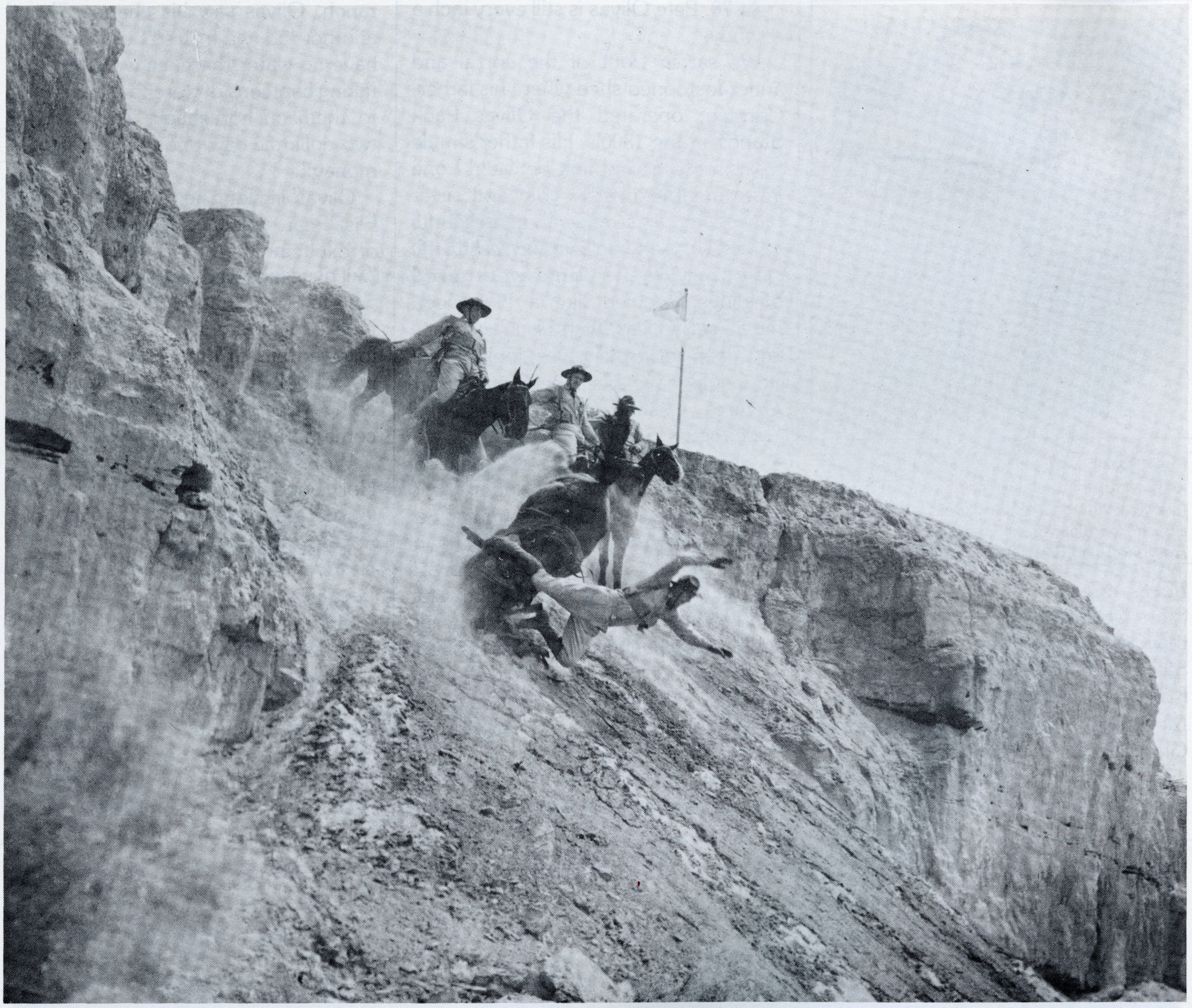
We sat in front of the corral and antler-festooned shed where his father, Carmen, operated the Olivas Pack Station in the 1800's. His father's mule trains were a vital link between Lone Pine and the nearby gold and silver mines. In a strange but delightful reversal of make-believe and reality, the ranch, with its time-weathered buildings, seemed like a Hollywood movie set. Olivas, with his craggy face and deep-set brown eyes, looked as if he could have been sent over from Central Casting—the quintessential "oldtimer."

Olivas is one of only a handful of remaining Lone Pine residents who were present at the beginning of Hollywood's romance with the town. The year was 1920; word had spread through town that silent film star Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle was bringing his film company to Lone Pine to shoot a feature called *The Round-up*. 12-year-old Pete Olivas heard the sound of opportunity knocking. "I was pretty young at the time," he recalls, "and I was always looking for a job." When the crew began shooting on a nearby ranch, Olivas saw his chance. "I and another kid, we figured out they didn't have no water there, so we took turns taking canteens of water back and forth to them on horseback. They paid us two dollars a day, and that was a lot of money!"

Olivas' life-long neighbor, 80-year-old Elisa Fear, vividly remembers the sense of excitement which swept the town. "All of us kids were excited because we got to see "Fatty" Arbuckle," she recalled with a chuckle. "Oh, sure, we followed him around when we weren't in school, to see what they were doing—that is, until our folks made us come home!"

Word quickly spread through the Hollywood film community that the journey to Lone Pine, most of it over unpaved roads, was well worth the effort, and the trickle of interest quickly became a torrent.

Businessman G. Walter Dow, who owned the town's lumberyard, began profiting almost immediately from the sale of materials for set construction, and was quick to capitalize on yet another business opportunity. Hotel space in the small town was so limited, film companies resorted to parking



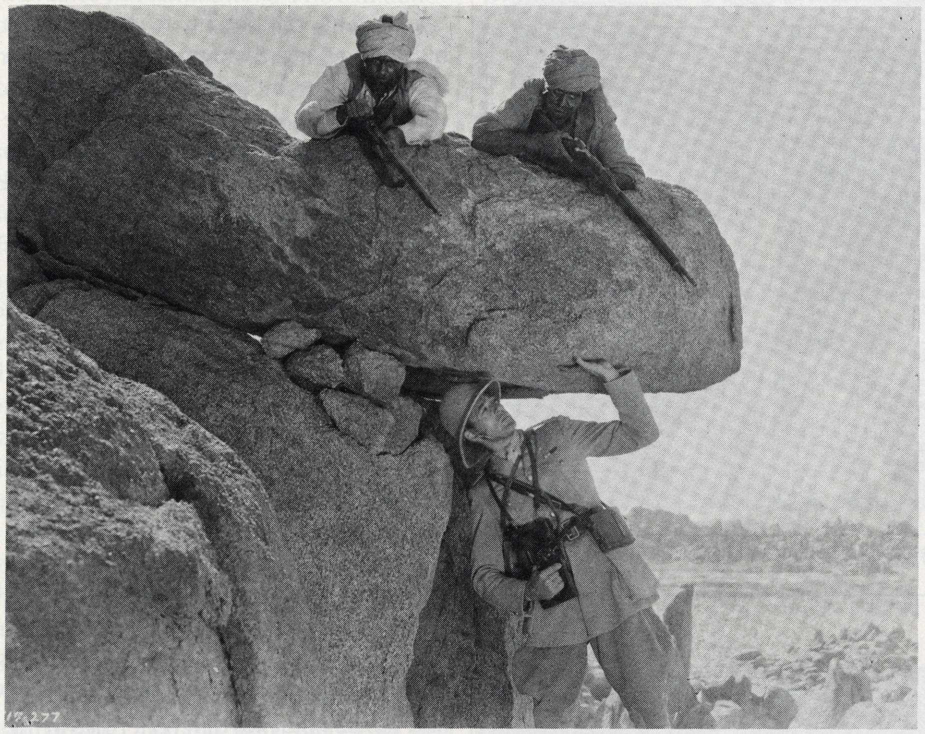
Yakima Canutt stops the hard way in the film, *Army Girl*. Canutt, the forefather of modern stunt men, invented almost every chase and vehicle stunt still in use today. This scene was shot east of the Owens River.

railroad Pullman cars on a siding near the Lone Pine station to accommodate the overflow. In 1923, he constructed the 65-room Dow Hotel on Main Street. (Although its facade has been changed, the original building is still a part of the Dow Villa Motel.) The hotel quickly became home-away-from-home for dozens of well-known actors, producers and directors.

R.B. "Russ" Spainhower, a Lone Pine rancher, was also an instrumental figure in the long relationship between Hollywood and Lone Pine. Spainhower, born in Tobaccoville, North Carolina, arrived in Lone Pine in 1909 as an employee of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. He got his start as a mule skinner on the Los Angeles aqueduct project, where the animals were being used extensively to supplement the crude machinery. Soon, he had a contract to house and feed several hundred mules, and parlayed his good fortune into ownership of the 320-acre Spainhower Ranch.

Pete Olivas spent many years "riding herd" on Spainhower's cattle. "He was a good guy," Olivas recalls, "but he didn't want anybody to cross him. He was rough, and a pretty powerful guy. There was nobody who wanted to have any trouble with him, because he could handle them pretty quick!"

By the time Hollywood arrived, Spainhower was waiting for them. The Spainhower Ranch (also known locally as the Anchor Ranch) became the place to call for livestock and equipment used to "dress up" the western sets. His daughter, 67-year-old Joy Spainhower Anderson, keeps a huge scrapbook filled with photographs and mementos of her father's film industry accomplishments. "He had plenty of horses, and a lot of other things they wanted," she said, "and he had wagons he'd collected through the years—carriages, covered wagons, or anything like that. Sometimes they'd want



Gary Cooper hides from bandits in *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*. The rock formations in the Alabama Hills provided interesting location settings for a variety of film genres.

roosters, dogs, old stoves. . . all kinds of things.

"Of course, they'd change their mind a lot of times. They'd call one day and say, 'We want 200 horses on such and such a day,' then they'd call back a day later and say, 'Change that to 50.' " But no matter what they needed, they knew Russ Spainhower would deliver. In an industry already plagued by flakes and phonies, Spainhower was a godsend. "He was one of the oldtimers," his daughter recalls, "and people say his word was as good as his bond. When he said he would do something, he did, and you didn't have to write it down."

Little Joy Spainhower became a familiar figure on location as she watched the silent film stars ply their trade—Ken Maynard, Hoot Gibson, Buck Jones, and Tom Mix. But her favorite was early silent film star Jack Hoxie. "I was a quiet little thing," she says, "and he used to call me his sweetheart."

By the time talkies became popular, Lone Pine was already established as a western film location. "There was just a constant stream of 'em comin' through town," Pete Olivas remembers. "There'd be one film company waitin' for the other film company to get out of here, because we didn't have enough room to accommodate all these people!"

"Silent" stars were supplanted by singing cowboys like Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. A young actor named John Wayne became a frequent guest at the Dow Hotel; William Boyd's unforgettable *Hopalong Cassidy* galloped through the rocky gorges of the Alabamas in at least 14 feature films.

Boyd always kept a cabin near Lone Pine for his use while he was on location, and he quickly became a favorite with the townspeople. "He was always so nice to everyone," one long time resident recalls, "and no matter what he was doing, he'd always find time to sign autographs or give kids a ride on his horse." Oldtimers in town still refer to a log cabin he rented near Tuttle Creek as the "Hopalong Cassidy place."

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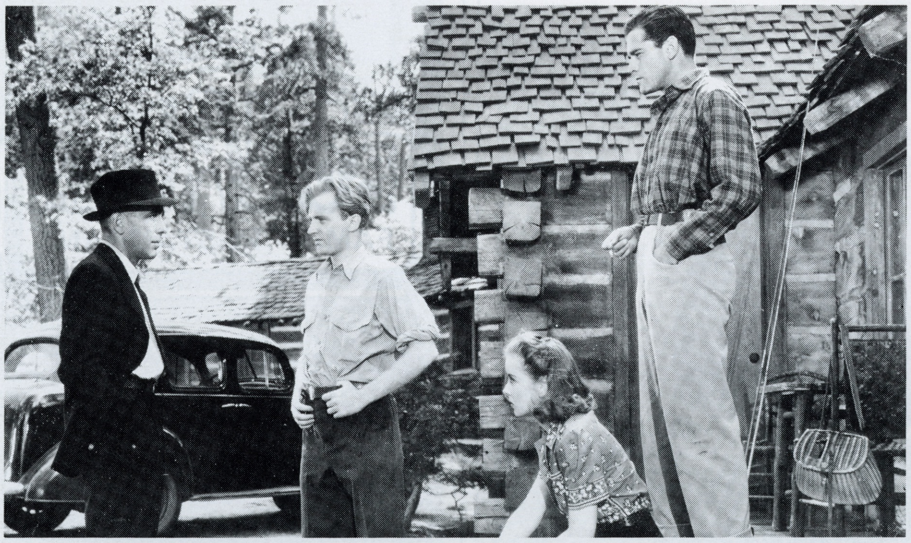
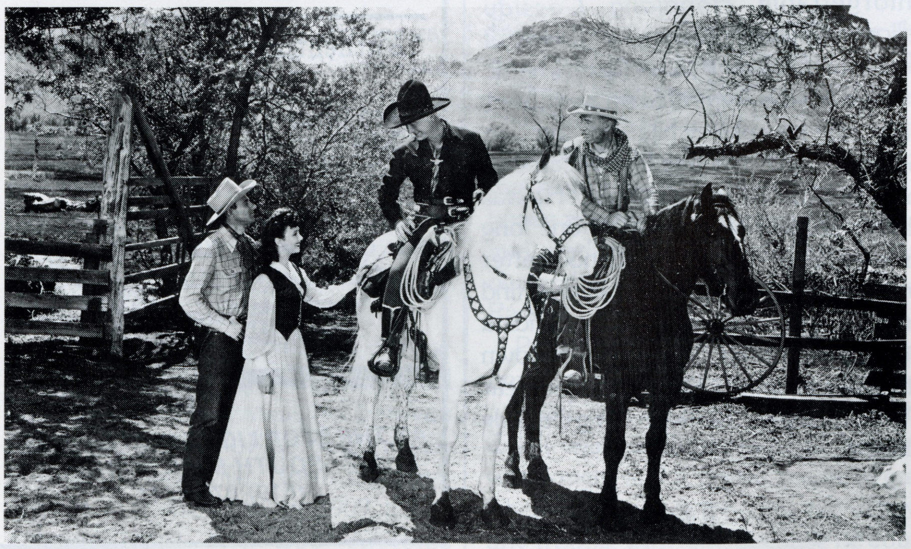


Humphrey Bogart in *High Sierra*. The cabin in the background was located off Whitney Portal Road.

Gene Autry and Smiley Burnette pursue bad guys in *Boots and Saddles* (above). William Boyd and Andy Clyde say farewell in *False Colors* (below).



Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Pete Olivas was continuing to supplement his income as a cowpuncher for the Spainhowers by working part-time in the film industry. He had long since graduated from errand boy to movie extra, livestock wrangler and occasional stuntman. "You had to know how to ride to make those chases down through those rocks and across those flats," he says, "because if you ever fell, you could get really skinned up!"

"Movie Flats," the wide, sagebrush-covered expanse between the Alabamas and the Sierra became a favorite spot for long chase scenes, because cameramen could follow the action from a truck driven on aptly-named Movie Road.

For the going rate of five dollars a day, Olivas made the run across the flats countless times. Sometimes he'd find himself playing different roles in the same scene. "You'd be the 'good guy' on one ride," he explains, "then they'd just change your clothes, and you'd ride across the flats as one of the 'bad guys.' " The film would then be spliced together so that it would appear as if the heroes were chasing the villains, when, in reality, it was Pete Olivas and his fellow riders chasing themselves. "That way," Olivas says, "they could save a lot of money."

The Sierra usually "starred" as themselves (who can forget Humphrey Bogart and Ida Lupino in *High Sierra*?), but they also acted as film "doubles" for other mountain ranges: the Peruvian Andes (*Tycoon*, starring John Wayne), the Rockies, and most frequently, as the Himalayas.

It was while doubling as the Himalayan foothills that the Alabamas played host to one of the largest film productions of its time. In late 1938, RKO Pictures filmed its epic *Gunga Din* almost entirely on location near Lone Pine. A small army of carpenters constructed a complete Hindu city called Tantrapur (nearly destroyed by fire before filming began), a British cantonment and parade grounds, and a huge Hindu temple. In addition, they constructed a tent city which housed 600 technicians and support crews for more than two months. At the time it was one of the largest location camps in the history of filmmaking. The climactic battle scene featured 1,200 extras, 400 horses, nine water buffalo, eight camels, and four elephants.

Finding 1,200 extras proved to be something of a chore, and when the production company ran out of men sufficiently swarthy to pass as Hindu Thugees, a make-up man came up with a novel solution, according to a studio press release: "In order to save time in making up the large number of extras, the company erected a 55-gallon drum of brown make-up paint, connected the tank to a spray gun, put six extras at a time on a wooden turntable, and sprayed them under pressure. . . "

Another production of epic proportions was brought to Lone Pine the following year. Darryl Zanuck arrived in 1939 to shoot key scenes for *Brigham Young* (with Tyrone Power). With him, Zanuck brought more than 500 people, 500 horses, 400 head of cattle, 100 sheep, 50 goats, 300 prairie schooners, and several herds of oxen imported from Sinaloa, Mexico to pull them. (According to studio production notes, the oxen had to be "re-broken" because they understood only Spanish.) In order to create the Platte River, the studio tapped the Los Angeles aqueduct for three million gallons of water. The "river" ran for a quarter-mile.

While the filmmakers legerdemain may have fooled most moviegoers, it didn't fool the locals. Joy Anderson was stationed in Texas with the Women's Army Corps when the film made its first run. "When I saw the movie, I had to laugh," she says. "The Great Salt Lake was really the Owens Lake (southeast of Lone Pine), and when Brigham Young raised his arm and said 'This is the place,' he was pointing straight at Mount Whitney!"

While filmmakers like Zanuck were drawn to the Alabamas by the incredible rock formations, they weren't always prepared for the extremes in temperature which helped produce the weathered backdrop. While *Brigham Young* was being produced, the Alabamas were baking under a hot summer sun. "The toughest scene for the players," a publicist wrote, "was when the heat

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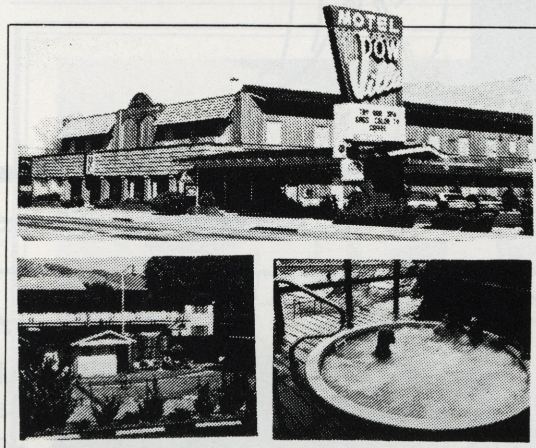

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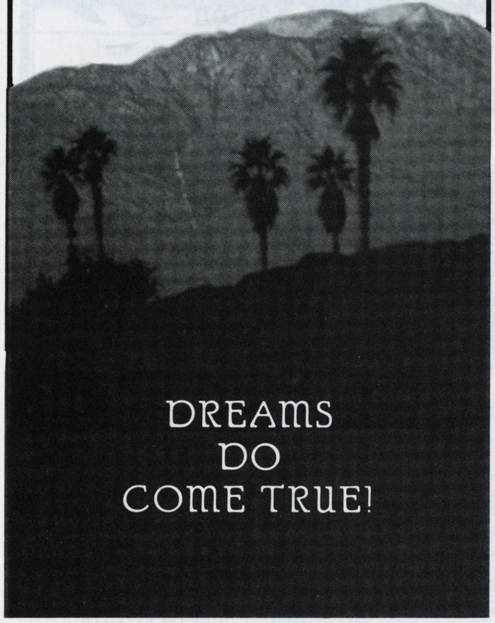

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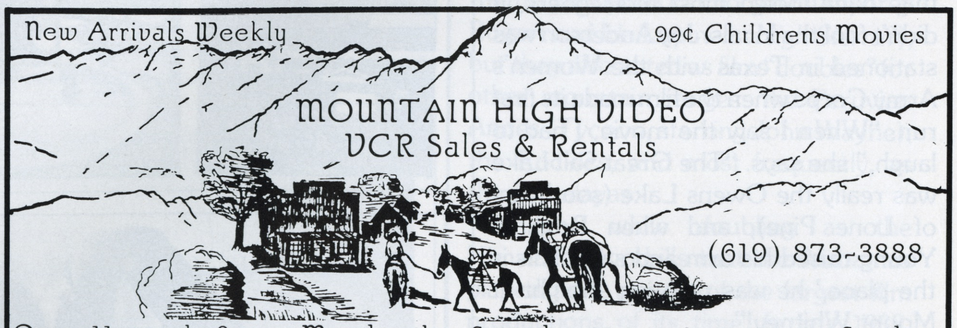

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registered 109 in the shade on the Lone Pine desert, and they were supposed to shiver with cold over roaring campfires for a blizzard scene. . . Make-up men rushed in every few minutes to wipe off the perspiration. . . "

Eleven years later, legendary film director Henry Hathaway arrived in midwinter to shoot scenes for a film supposedly taking place on hot desert sands. In one sequence, a group of actors was supposed to ride up to the camera, leap from their horses, and start talking. "They jumped off," Hathaway told a studio publicist, "but nothing came from their lips but blue smoke. Not a word! They were so cold, they couldn't say a thing!"

* * *

But while filmmakers were battling the elements in the Alabama Hills, frigid winds of change were blowing through the film industry. With the emergence of the studio craft unions and post-war inflation it was becoming prohibitively expensive to make low budget B westerns at faraway locations.

One of the principal producers of B westerns was Republic Pictures, which churned out 386 of them over a 24-year period, many of them shot in the Alabamas. Republic Pictures historian Jack Mathis, who has written extensively on the subject (his upcoming book *Republic Confidential* is expected to fill 1,300 pages), summed it all up. "After World War II," he says, "the studios were getting more and more pressure on them all the time. The B westerns were getting too expensive to shoot in locations like Lone Pine; so you saw a shift away from places like Lone Pine to places like the Iverson Ranch (in Los Angeles)." Iverson Ranch had been used extensively for cowboy movies even before filmmakers discovered the Alabamas.

In addition, the subtle shadings of color which add so much to the appearance of ageless mystery in the Alabamas became a liability. Early color film couldn't distinguish the hues. "Because of that," says Mathis, "the high budget A films were moving to

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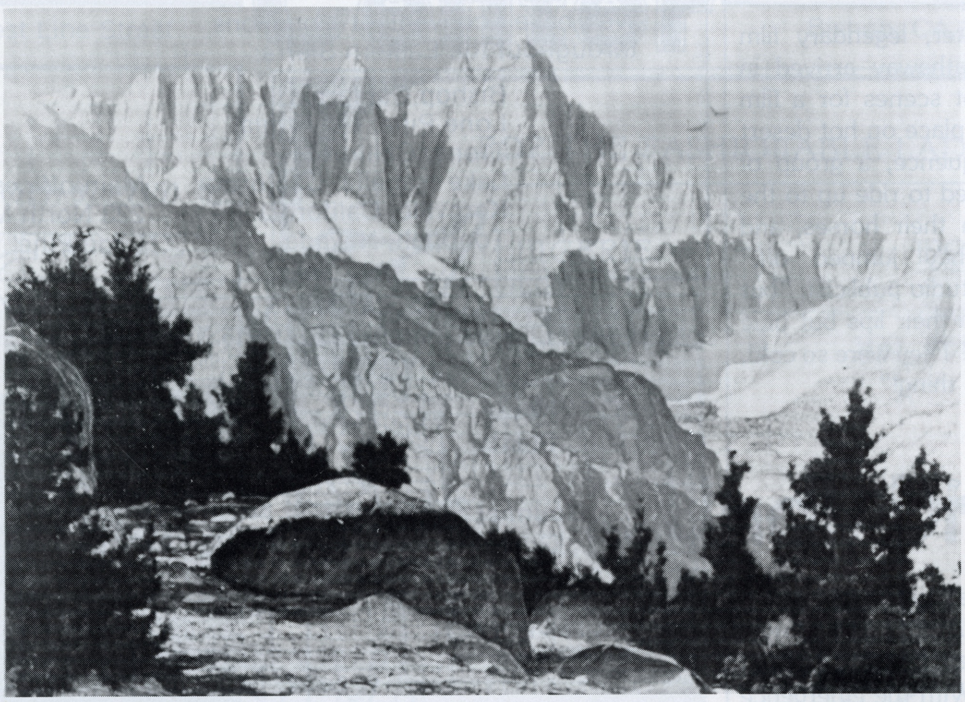

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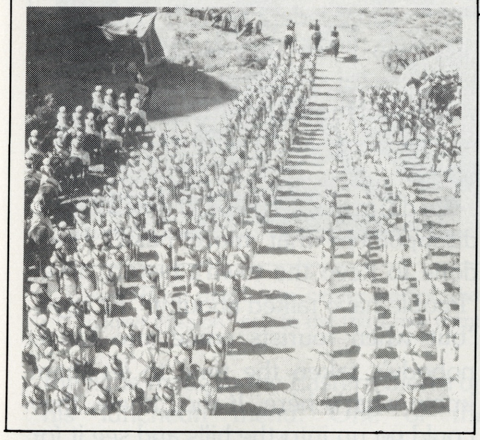

Troops line up in two scenes from *Gunga Din*. Segments like this were filmed on such a large scale that assistant directors hid in the rocks and used military field telephones to coordinate the action.

places which photographed better. . . places like Mammoth and Utah with more vegetation."

Lone Pine enjoyed a brief revival in the early '50s when television "discovered" the western, and the Alabamas became the locale for a half-dozen oaters, including *Wild Bill Hickock, Wagon Train, Cimarron Strip, Have Gun Will Travel,* and *The Lone Ranger*.

The best known of the Lone Rangers, Clayton Moore, recently recalled the weeks he spent filming in the Alabamas (his dash down the road seen in the opening credits, six-gun blazing, was filmed along Movie Flats). "Great spot!" he exclaimed. "A very romantic area, very rough and rugged. The rocks are tremendous, and the background, with the snow-capped mountains, made for beautiful scenery. I did other pictures up there too (before the Lone Ranger), and that would take you back to the forties." Moore also has fond recollections of the townspeople. "The people of Lone Pine were just very hospitable, very nice."

But soon, the television cowboys went the way of their movie counterparts, victims not only of tight budgets, but of changing public tastes. The cowboy, and to a large extent, the frontier ethic he symbolized, had become passe.

* * *

Like the gold and silver mines before it, the film industry provided a rich vein of income for the town of Lone Pine. As a studio publicist correctly noted 35 years ago, "A business boom is created (in Lone Pine) whenever a film

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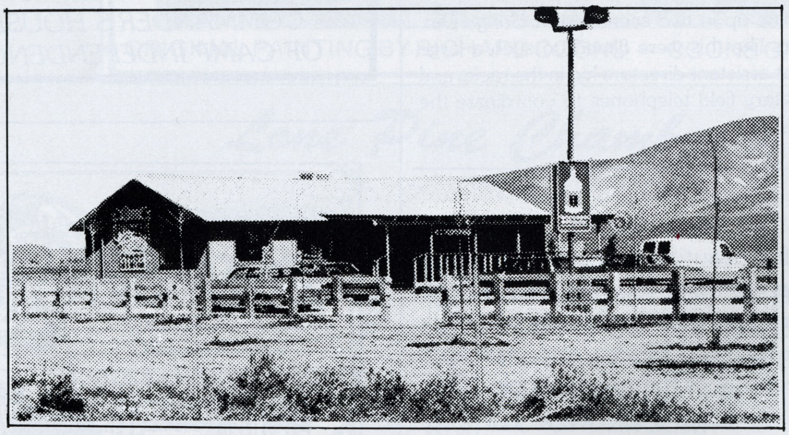

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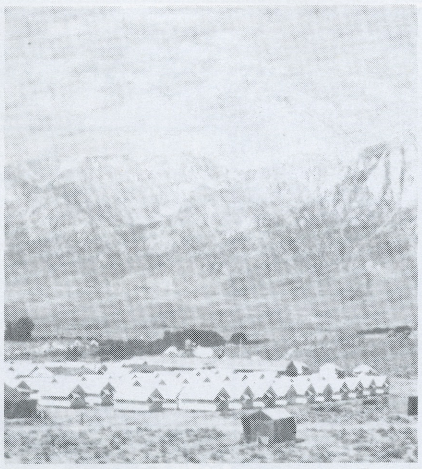


Quarters were built to house the massive number of technicians and extras used for the filming of *Gunga Din*.

company pays a visit."

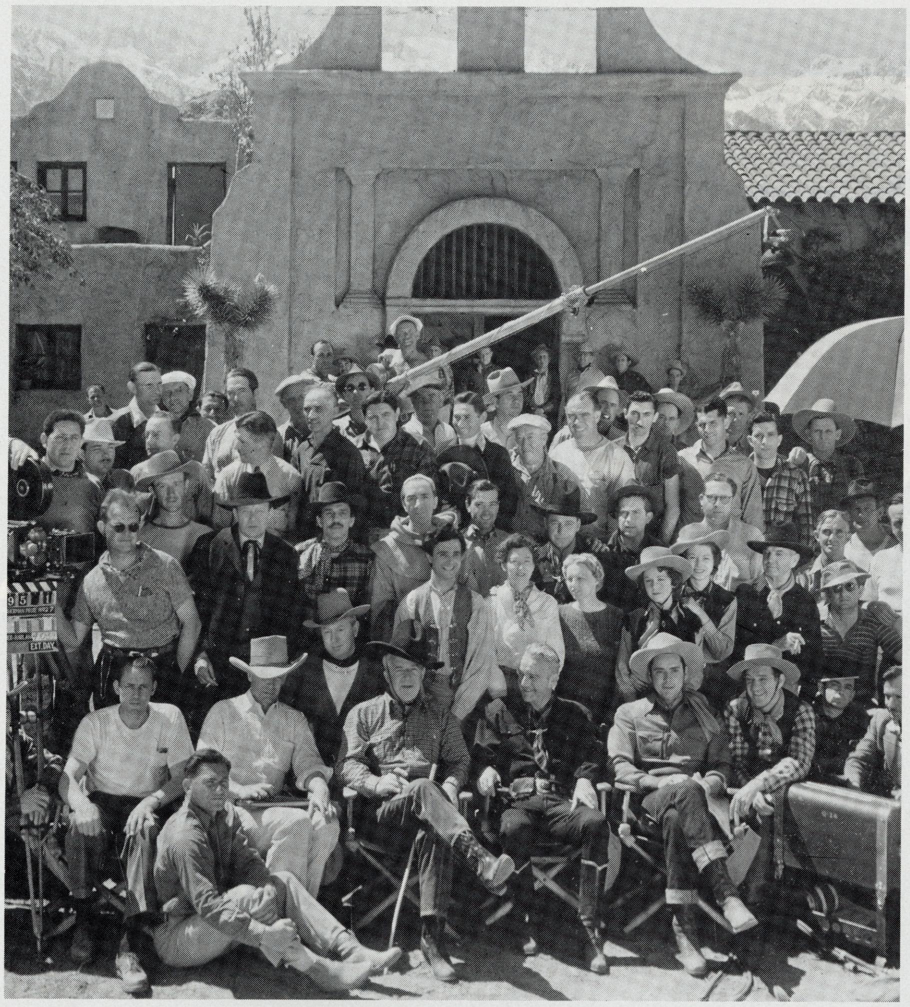
And, like his father before him, who watched the gold and silver mines he depended upon "go bust," Pete Olivas watched the cowboy film, and the boom town atmosphere it created in Lone Pine, simply fade away. "It really hurt the town when they stopped coming here," he says, "a lot of guys got a lot of work from the studios. They left a lot of money here, and I wish they'd come back."

Oldtimers like Olivas are disappointed that more hasn't been done to keep the town's history alive. "People have talked about it," he says, "but when tourists come into town, nobody's taken the time to let them know what's here. If they knew, they could go up into the hills and see it for themselves."

A few of the town's merchants have made their own efforts to remind visitors of the town's long association with the film industry:

—At the Indian Trading Post, a souvenir and gift shop, owners Richard and Diane Kennedy still show customers the autographs of dozens of film stars engraved in the door frame and wood paneling, a tradition begun by the store's original owners, who invited visiting celebrities to "sign in." "We had a Disneyland executive drop by last year," recalls Diane, "and he wanted to buy the walls to decorate his office. We said, 'No way!' "

—Across Main Street at the Sportsman Restaurant, owner Chuck Easton, a western art collector, has listed some of



William Boyd (front row, center, without hat) poses with a film crew at the Spainhower Ranch "Spanish Mission" set. In the third row (center, with black hat) is Boyd's "double."

the films made in the Eastern Sierra on his luncheon menu. One of the restaurant walls is decorated with his collection of western film posters. "A lot of people stop to look at them, " he says, "especially on Fridays and Sundays, when there are a lot of tourists in town."

—At the Smoke Signals Restaurant, owner Curt Herring, a western movie buff, distributes a home-made map showing the approximate locations around town where movies were made. "I did it because customers were always asking me for directions," he says, "and it isn't just Americans who are interested. Europeans go *nuts* over this sort of thing!"

On the south end of town, Joy Spainhower Anderson still lives on her father's ranch, surrounded by memories of movie sets and cowboy stars. Russ Spainhower, the gruff but dependable rancher who had become the studio's Man in Lone Pine died in 1957, creating a void which was never adequately filled. In 1976, many of the wagons and carriages he had collected through the years were sold at auction.

Joy Spainhower remembers. "So much of it is already forgotten," she says, "and it *should* be remembered. It should be recorded, because it's so much a part of the history of this area." So far, though, no such effort has been made. And while Joy Spainhower remembers, she's afraid that her generation might be the last to recall "those thrilling days of yesteryear." ☐

Jim Mitchell won three Emmy awards during his seven years as an investigative reporter for KCBS-TV in Los Angeles. He is currently living in Independence, California, and pursuing a freelance writing career.

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Sierra Profile

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John Ascuaga's Nugget

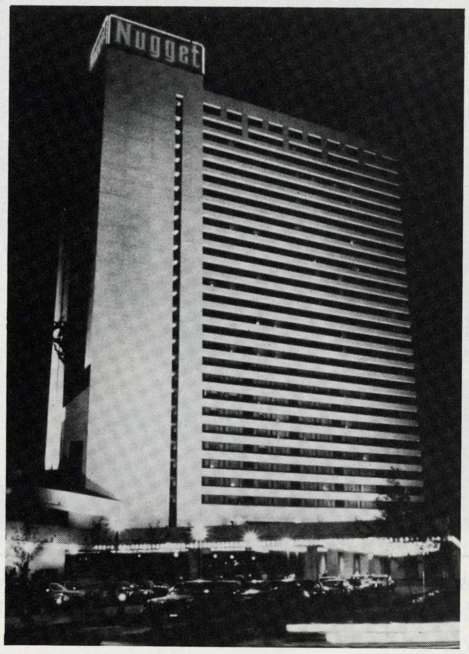
THE SINGULAR STYLE OF JOHN ASCUAGA

by Marty Forstenzer

John Ascuaga is best known as owner of one of the major hotel-casinos in the Reno-Lake Tahoe area, but he might be happiest on the back of a horse on one of his Eastern Sierra cattle ranches. "I was born and raised on a ranch, so it's kind of inherited," he explains. The 60-year-old owner of John Ascuaga's Nugget in Sparks, Nevada built the self-supporting ranching operation gradually over the last 30 years, at the same time as he was turning the Nugget into one of the best known gaming establishments in Northern Nevada.

Since the completion of its 28-story hotel tower in 1984, the Nugget has become the third largest hotel and convention center in the Reno-Lake Tahoe area. The skyscraping tower is a landmark visible from almost anywhere in the Truckee Meadows area, an appropriate symbol of Ascuaga's accomplishments in the gaming industry.

Ascuaga's success is directly attributable to his expertise in several fields, and to personal traits: drive, determination, and a singular ability to relate to diverse kinds of people. "He's a real dynamo," says his longtime friend Peter Laxalt, Reno attorney and brother



of Nevada Senator Paul Laxalt. "I don't know of anyone who puts as much energy into his daily business as John, or who does things as efficiently. He's a real pro at the casino business, and at the ranching business also."

In person, Ascuaga is amiable and energetic, with a wry sense of humor and a down-to-earth, "ranch-style" charm. When first asked if he would consent to an interview for a profile, Ascuaga answered, "Oh, hell, I don't care." Behind the cowboy exterior, though, one can perceive a sharp business mind and a very shrewd evaluator of people.

Ascuaga has been the sole owner of the Nugget since 1960, a rare situation in the corporate world of the modern casino industry. The hotel and casino are stamped with his style and personality. His name is incorporated into the casino's logo—John Ascuaga's Nugget is how the establishment is properly and commonly known. Guests staying in the hotel find in their rooms a few personal messages of welcome from Ascuaga, with his picture and signature. C.J. Hadley, former editor of Nevada Magazine, notes, "He's personally involved in all of his businesses. He's worked like hell to get where he is, and he's very proud of it."

Ascuaga was born in Caldwell, Idaho, and grew up in the nearby farm town of Notus. His father was a basque sheepman, who came to this country from Spain in 1912. John was raised along with a twin sister, and another sister and brother.

He picked up his first experience in the hotel business working as a bellman at a lodge on Idaho's Payette Lake during summer vacations from college. Ascuaga holds two degrees: a B.S. in accounting from the University of Idaho and a B.A. in hotel and restaurant management from Washington State University. He gravitated toward the hotel and restaurant business, although his career plans actually developed gradually over a period of years. "I just enjoyed working with people," he explains. "I'll tell you, being a bellman was a good test. You have to learn to shine shoes, to clean up rooms. . . whatever."

Ascuaga notes that in the early days, the Sparks location was a distinct disadvantage. "They kind of looked down on us here from our neighboring city (of Reno)," he says.

After graduation from college in 1951, Ascuaga was hired by restauranteur Dick Graves as food supervisor for Graves' operations in Idaho. Three years later, he became food director for Graves' Nevada restaurants. When the Sparks Nugget opened in 1955, Graves named Ascuaga general manager. The original Nugget was a 60-seat coffee shop located on B Street, across the street from where the Nugget Hotel-Casino now stands. In 1960, Graves retired and sold his interests to Ascuaga.

The Nugget's owner notes that in the early days, the Sparks location was a distinct disadvantage. "Nobody gave us

Top left: The 28-story hotel-tower has made the Nugget one of the largest casinos in the Reno-Lake Tahoe area.
Above: Watering cattle on one of Ascuaga's Eastern Sierra ranches. *C.J. Hadley photo*

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Ascuaga (at left) has found a way to successfully mix cattle ranching with the casino business. The gambler at center is comedian Norm Crosby.

a thing, us being from Sparks," he says. "They kind of looked down on us here from our neighboring city (of Reno).

"But things have changed so much during the last thirty years," he adds. "Time has taken care of a lot of the problems. People don't think of Sparks by itself anymore or Reno by itself, they think of it as one unit."

Ascuaga enjoys an excellent relationship with the Sparks community and its city government. Sparks City Manager Patricia Thompson says, "Mr. Ascuaga has been very supportive of almost all Sparks city programs, and he never asks for any special favors. He has been willing to help with projects that were for the good of the Sparks community, even though they weren't of any special benefit to his own business or to the gaming industry."

Ascuaga forged his prosperous casino business from a core of local customers. "We established a very strong local clientele, because we like to cater to them, because they're good customers," he says.

Ascuaga's standing in Nevada has grown along with the size and popularity of his casino. When the Nugget gave a dinner celebrating the opening of the hotel tower in 1984, the list of attending guests included Governor Richard Bryan, U.S. Senator Chic Hecht, Congresswoman Barbara Vucanovich, and Sparks Mayor Jim Spoo.

Ascuaga is a member of the board of directors of St. Mary's Hospital in Reno, and has received the "Civic Leader of the Year" award from the Reno-Sparks Chamber of Commerce, and the "Distinguished Nevadan" award from the University of Nevada-Reno, among other honors. He has set up the John Ascuaga Scholarship, which has awarded college scholarship grants to over 140 Northern Nevada high school students.

Despite its large size, the Nugget maintains the reputation for being one of the friendliest of casinos. "We've always had the philosophy that if you get people here and treat them right, they'll come back," Ascuaga explains. He also believes in treating his employees right. "We feel that a dishwasher downstairs is just as important as the CEO. We've had dishwashers and other people who have been working in our kitchens for 25, 27 years." Ascuaga makes daily tours through the casino, and often stops for a meal in the employee dining room, or to chat with employees during their breaks.

Several of his friends and associates swear to the amazing fact that Ascuaga remembers the name of practically every one of his 2,500 employees. "He creates a family atmosphere in all of his businesses," Laxalt says. "He's loved by (his employees) because he's so one on one with them. Unless they screw up, of course. He won't allow that because his standards are high—but he always deals with them very fairly."

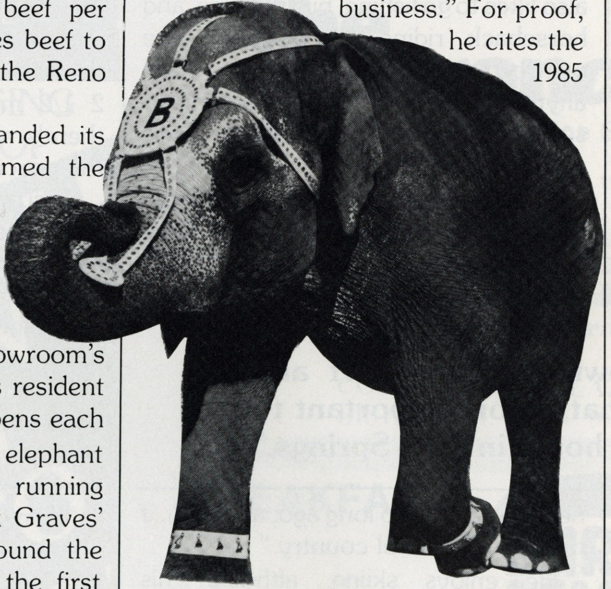
The Nugget prints an in-house publication called "Nugget Scene," which profiles employees from all levels of the hotel and casino, announces employee awards, and discusses items and events of general interest to those who work at the Nugget.

In addition to its reputation for friendliness, the Hotel-Casino is known for having the best quality food, and especially, not surprisingly, the best beef. The eight restaurants which line the casino floor range from an oyster bar to a recently added buffet restaurant. "We'll put our food operation here up against any in the world," the Nugget's owner says proudly. Much of the beef used at the Nugget comes from Ascuaga's own ranches, by way of his Sparks meat packing company. The company, Nugget Meat Packers, handles a quarter million pounds of beef per month. Ascuaga also supplies beef to most of the other hotels in the Reno area.

The Nugget recently expanded its main showroom, now renamed the "Celebrity Cabaret." In the past, the room has featured such artists as B.J. Thomas, Jose Feliciano, and Roger Miller. Another performer who frequently graces the showroom's stage is Bertha, the Nugget's resident elephant, whose stage act opens each nightly show. The 41-year-old elephant is the Nugget's longest running attraction. "Bertha was Dick Graves' idea," relates Ascuaga. "Around the time that we were building the first showroom, Dick just happened to run into this elephant in Baraboo, Wisconsin. She has to be the greatest elephant. I wish I could find another Bertha, but I don't think I will." Ascuaga has built an "Elephant Palace" just west of the Nugget, which has a private swimming pool and fenced exercise yard. On occasion, the Nugget loans Bertha for appearances in parades and other functions.

Ascuaga periodically leaves his desk at the Nugget to oversee his cattle ranching interests. He owns three ranches—the Simpson Ranch near Bridgeport, another in the Smith Valley, and the Jack's Valley Ranch south of Carson City, where he lives and from which he commutes the 46 miles to the Nugget each work day. All of the ranches serve to complement each other in the cattle operation: the Bridgeport location provides native meadows for the commercial herd's summer grazing, the Smith Valley ranch is where the herd is wintered, and Jack's Valley is the home of Ascuaga's registered Herefords.

The 2200-acre Simpson Ranch adjacent to the Bridgeport Reservoir is the starting point of Ascuaga's annual fall cattle drive. Along with several hands and perhaps one or two friends, he conducts the drive on horseback, taking cattle from their summer range to winter in the Smith Valley. "We're very selective who goes on the drive," he explains. "We usually have eight or nine people; we could have 900 if we wanted, but it's not a party. It's strictly business." For proof, he cites the 1985 drive, which was conducted in a severe storm more typical of a Sierra midwinter. He says, "It was the worst blizzard we'd ever experienced. It started the third day when we were going over Sweetwater Summit. The wind was blowing, and the only good thing about it was, it was to our backs. We about froze to death, but there wasn't one who quit. We were dressed



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Each fall, the casino owner conducts a cattle drive from his ranch in Bridgeport to another in the Smith Valley. *C.J. Hadley photo*

for it, and the cows know the way home." Ascuaga brings along a cook from the Nugget, who serves filet mignon and other Nugget-style specialties to those on the drive.

Each year, the casino owner holds a commercial bull sale at his Smith Valley ranch, and also conducts a sale of registered Hereford bulls from, of all places, the stage of the Nugget's main showroom. The event, known as the Nugget Invitational Hereford Sale, "has evolved into the longest lasting and most important event of its kind in the industry," according to the Hereford Journal.

Ascuaga's friends emphasize that ranching is not a sideline, but a primary interest. "It's the love of his life," Peter Laxalt comments. "I think he would rather do that than anything else." C.J. Hadley, who was along on the '85 drive, says, "It's a whole different world, and he's very happy there. It's probably where he would prefer to be."

When Ascuaga takes time off from business, he enjoys playing golf, and also likes to go fishing, bird hunting, and horseback riding. "I just love the outdoors, probably more than anything," he says. "I wish I had time to see every square inch between here and Bridgeport.

"That Bridgeport is really something. I went back on the East Walker River near there not too long ago, and man, if that isn't beautiful country."

He enjoys skiing, although his commitments don't always allow him time for that pursuit. "I haven't been able to go so far this year, but I'm going soon," he said last February. "I go to Mt. Rose, and Heavenly, and Squaw. I'm going down to Mammoth pretty soon, too." Cross-country skiing is not his style, he says, explaining that he "likes gravity."

The Nugget's owner lives in Jack's Valley with his wife Rose and the one of his four children who is still in high school. "I'm right at the base of the Sierras on the Jack's Valley Ranch, and I've got a nice home. Our place is one of the oldest ranches in Nevada; it's on a 2 1/2 mile road that dead ends so there's no through traffic. You get all the peace and quiet you want."

Ascuaga has put down roots on the Eastern Sierra ranch. "There's no *way* I would ever think of moving away," he says. "I've had every opportunity to go to Atlantic City, and to Vegas, but I've always said that if I did that, I couldn't visit my friends in Bridgeport, Wellington, Smith. . . all these quaint little towns mean more to me than all the big cities put together.

"If I moved, then I couldn't stop at the Heyday Lounge, or Charlie Grosso's in Wellington, or go down to Bridgeport and camp on the creek. That's more important to me than to say I have a house in Palm Springs."

That may not be the typical outlook for the owner of a major Nevada hotel-casino, but it's typical of the hard-working Ascuaga, a man who has his priorities straight, who does things his own way, and who's proved that he knows what he's doing. □

"If I moved, then I couldn't stop at the Heyday Lounge, or Charlie Grosso's in Wellington, or go down to Bridgeport and camp on the creek. That's more important to me than to say I have a house in Palm Springs."

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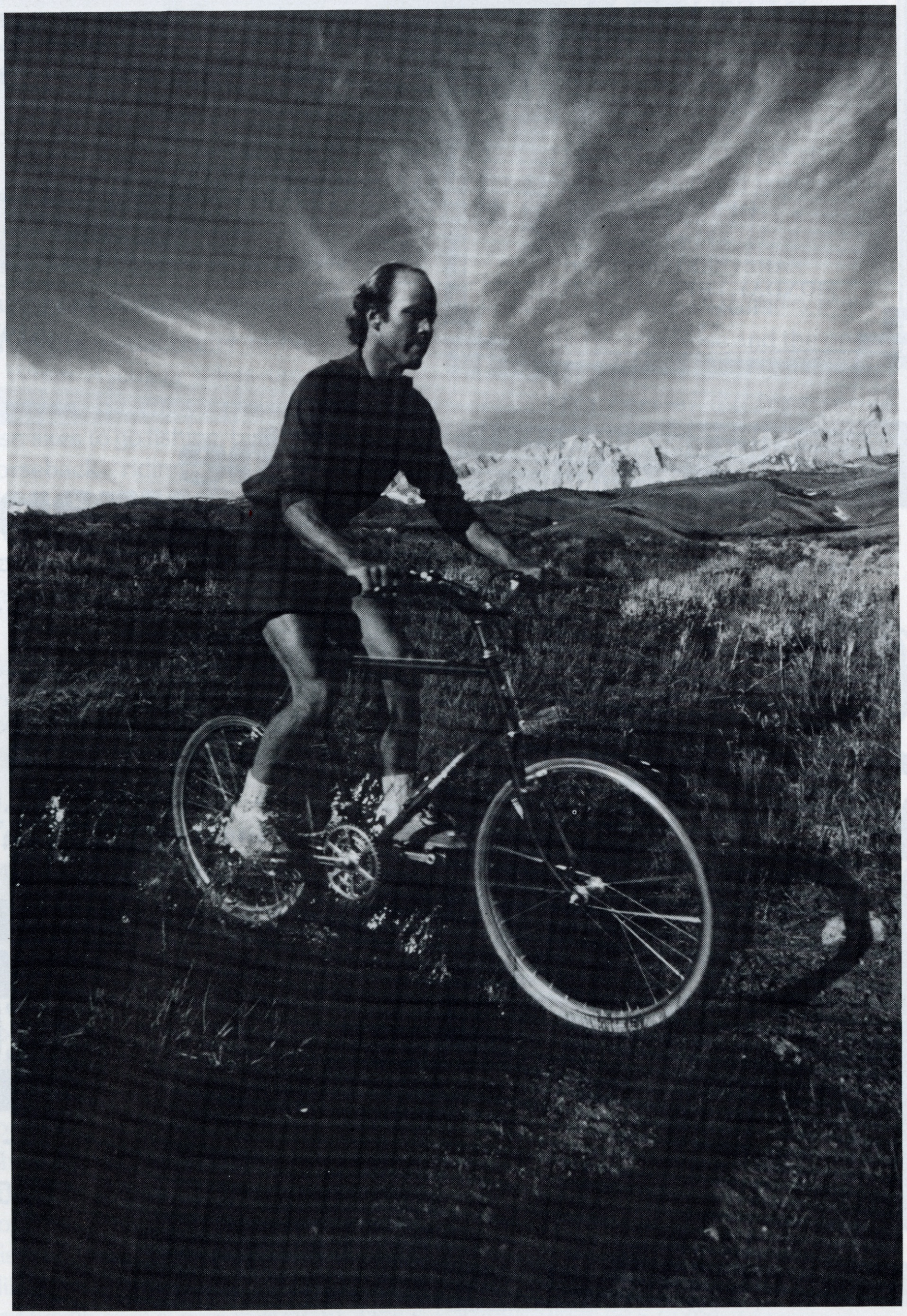


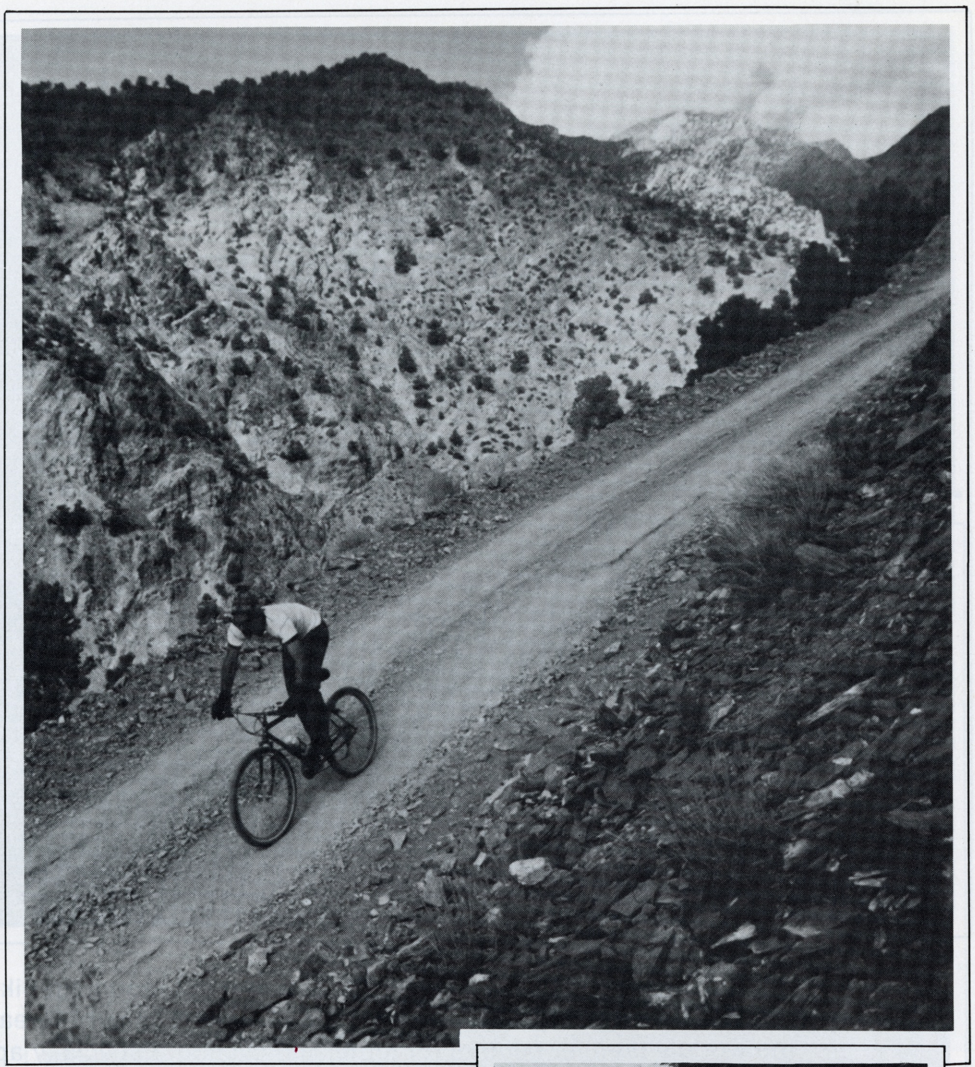
Photo essay and text
by Gordon Wiltsie

Since lightweight, knobby-tired mountain bikes were first invented a decade ago, their popularity has swept around the world. Once called "clunkers," these sophisticated riding machines are now anything but, made of special alloys and geared for the steepest, rockiest terrain imaginable. No longer are cyclists restricted to pavement; mountain bikes have established a whole new horizon for self-powered, wheeled travel.

It has only been about five years since the first mountain bikes rolled through the Eastern Sierra and Owens Valley, but in that short time this area has emerged as one of the world's premier centers for all-terrain cycling. Especially appealing are the wide number of dirt roads leading to spectacular vistas and great, open expanses where one can ride without competition from hordes of motorized vehicles.

One of the best places for cycling in Eastern California is the White Mountains, laced with jeep tracks and paved roads that are perfect for the rigors of mountain biking. Here, cyclists can ride on relatively good dirt roads past the world's oldest trees and overlooking sweeping vistas of Nevada, the Owens Valley and the Sierra Nevada. Here, too, the issue of off-road biking arises. Bicycle tires do cause erosion that could damage the high altitude tundra or bristlecone pine roots, and a strong local ethic has evolved encouraging riders to stay only on established roads and trails, outside of designated wilderness areas, where any wheeled vehicles are prohibited.

Last summer, local entrepreneurs sponsored the Plumline Mountain Bike Rally, a three-day event that solidly established the Owens Valley as a major competition center for mountain biking. This contest began with a challenge called Observed Trials, in which riders are judged by the finesse with which they control their cycles through "natural" obstacles like fallen logs, stumps, stream crossings and trees closer together than handlebars are wide. The second event was the aptly-named Mammoth Mountain Kamikaze Race, in which contestants loaded their bikes onto a ski gondola so they could plummet against time down steep and loose pumice roads from the summit to the base lodge (winning times were under 9 minutes). Crowning event of the series was the Plumline 7500, called by many the longest, hardest mountain bike race in the world. The route starts at Bishop's Millpond Recreation area, follows rugged roads for 7500 feet of elevation gain to the summit of Coyote Road in the Sierra, then hurtles back to Millpond down a steep, rocky cliffside jeep track with numerous stream crossings and tight hairpin corners. This race series will be repeated this summer, including also a second "Kamikaze" beginning at Schulman Grove of the bristlecones and plummeting down radically steep Silver Canyon Road, one of the scariest bike descents anywhere. Spectators can count on plenty of excitement at any of these races.



Many who rode in the Plumline 7500 race found themselves too captivated by the beauty around them to really believe they were in a race. The great natural environment of the Owens Valley, Sierra Nevada, and White Mountains was the reason many local riders were attracted to the sport in the first place.

While steep ascents or descents on a mountain bike can be dangerous and challenging, mountain biking can also be a family or group activity, a good way to get outdoors in healthy recreation with friends. As long as you are careful not to pedal too fast and stay on relatively smooth roads, even young children can participate by riding in a special bike seat. Helmets are advisable, however.

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Mountain bikes can provide a new, uncrowded way to see such popular places as Yosemite Valley, where numerous paved bike paths wind through especially scenic locations, unthreatened by the gridlock and speeding automobiles of a busy holiday weekend. Also, riding a bike makes you feel far more intimately attuned to the peaks and meadows around you than does a view from the window of a speeding car. As with rock climbing, cross-country skiing and other self-propelled sports, there is a special magic to powering your own way through vast and spectacular landscapes.

Gordon Wiltsie is an Eastern Sierra-based photojournalist whose photos of the Sierra have appeared in publications around the world.

BUD LIGHT BEER MAMMOTH Cycling Classic

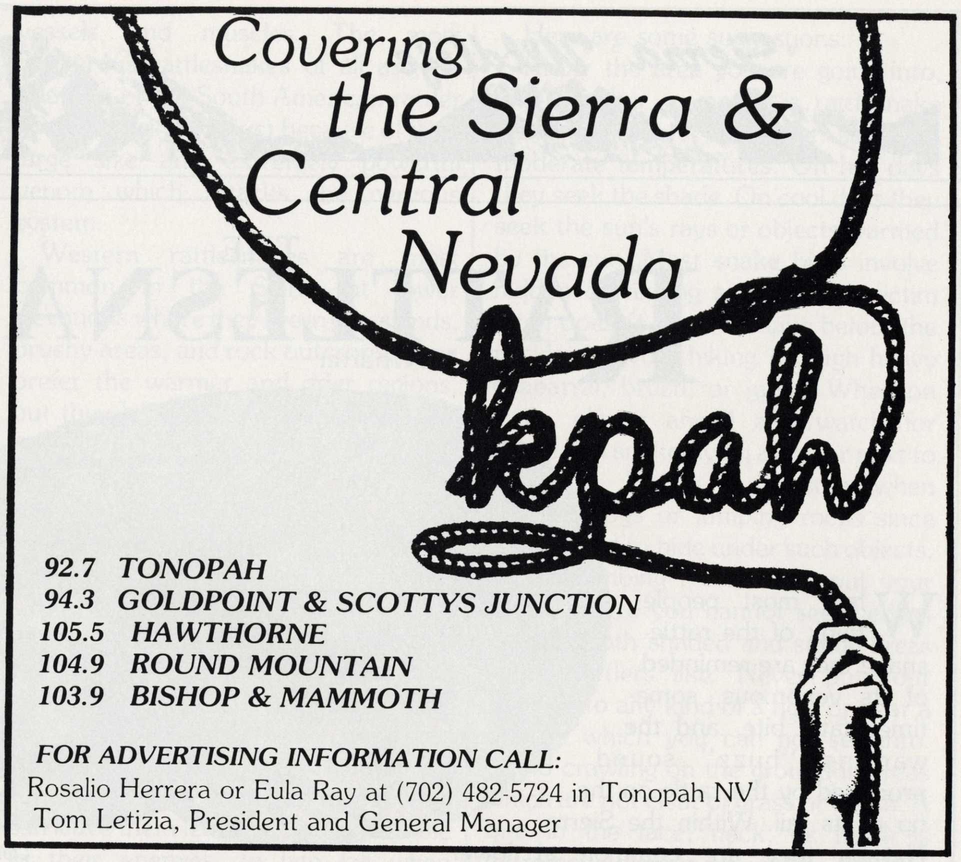
From July 12-20, Mammoth Lakes and environs will be the site of the 1986 Bud Light Mammoth Cycling Classic. The second annual Classic will be headlined by two world-class cycling events: the Mammoth Mountain Kamikaze on July 12-13, and the Whiskey Creek Stage Race from July 16-20. In addition to the exciting race events, spectators will find other cycle-related attractions including a bicycle manufacturer's expo, freestyle demonstrations, training clinics, and bicycling seminars.

The Mammoth Mountain Kamikaze is a three stage, NORBA-sanctioned mountain biking event which opens with an Observed Trials competition on Saturday morning, July 12. That afternoon, an endurance race will be held near Mammoth Mountain's Chair 12; the event concludes Sunday morning with the competition's main match, the Kamikaze downhill, where racers streak down the side of Mammoth Mountain near Chair 14, finishing at the Mammoth Mountain Inn.

The second major event, the Whiskey Creek Stage Race, is a multi-stage, USCF-sanctioned road race which has been officially designated a 7-Eleven Cup Series race and a National Prestige Classic. The six stages of the Whiskey Creek race open with a time trial up Mammoth's Lake Mary Road on July 16, and continue over the next four days with races near the town of Lee Vining, on Sherwin Grade, and through Mammoth Lakes.

The races are open to all entrants, not just experienced cyclists. Each event has a "citizen's" category for beginners or casual entrants. Also, on July 14 and 15, *Bicycle Rider Magazine* will sponsor biking excursions into the beautiful backcountry near Mammoth Lakes.

The headquarters for the race is the Mammoth Mountain Inn; race registration and information about the Cycling Classic will be available in the lobby, or can be obtained by sending in the form at right. The Inn will have a special room rate for those participating in the cycling events. The number for room reservations is (800) 228-4947.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THE RATTLESNAKE

by Mike McWherter

Dan Smith photo

When most people think of the rattlesnake they are reminded of its venomous, sometimes fatal bite, and the warning "buzz" sound produced by the rattle on the tip of its tail. Within the Sierra Nevada they are common at lower elevations, but are sometimes found in the mountains. One has even been seen at 11,000 feet. It is to the advantage of anyone who lives or plays in rattlesnake country to know something about their ways, and also how to avoid them.

Nature has designed the rattlesnake with a remarkable biting apparatus that enables it to capture small prey by a fatally poisonous bite. This deadly bite also serves as a defense against larger animals that would seek to kill it—humans included. The rattlesnake's biting apparatus consists of two long, hollow, sharp fangs which are hinged and folded inside the roof of its mouth. The fangs act much like hypodermic needles conducting venom from a pair of poison glands.

The rattlesnake prepares to strike by positioning its head and the forepart of its body in an S-shaped curve with the rest of the snake forming a base, usually some form of a coil. The tail is held upright with rattles vibrating to make the characteristic "buzz" sound. It strikes by opening its mouth nearly 180 degrees, erecting its fangs, and propelling its head toward its victim. Generally rattlesnakes are unable to strike more than one-half their total length and seldom higher than a foot.

All rattlesnakes have facial pits (giving rise to the name "pit vipers") which are heat detectors used to locate, even at night, small warm-blooded mammals. Their eyesight is considered moderately good at short distances. Prey may be taken as it passes too close to the waiting snake, or the snake may pursue it into the darkness of its burrow. Victims are usually mice, birds, small squirrels, and rabbits. If the prey is hit, fangs penetrate the flesh, venom is injected, and the snake recoils, all in an instant. The venom kills quickly (preventing retaliatory bites) and is believed to help in the snake's digestion. If the prey is large, such as a rabbit, or the strike has not been fully effective, the victim may travel a few yards before it loses control and dies. The rattler having waited a short time uses its sense of smell to locate the hapless animal. After finding it, the snake cautiously flicks its tongue over the animal to determine if it is really dead and no further struggle will occur. The animal is then swallowed whole.

The bite, as well as the threat of it, is used in defense against larger animals. The snake cannot distinguish between a creature that intends harm and one that stumbles upon it unintentionally. If the threat comes too close, the rattler's reaction will be to defend itself by a strike. For survival reasons the rattler would rather flee than fight. But when escape seems unlikely, the rattler assumes its coil stance and usually, but not always, sounds its rattle. The rattle is the snake's warning system. It is important to remember that rattlesnakes have been known to strike without first rattling, especially if surprised. The rattle consists of a horny material, keratin, whose segments are loosely interlocked. The number of segments on the rattle does not indicate the snake's age, as is commonly believed. Each time the snake sheds its skin, a new segment is added to the rattle. A young snake may shed its skin more than once a year and older rattlers frequently lose segments.

In the U.S. the number of human fatalities which occur from bites of all types of rattlesnakes has been estimated to be about 3%. The danger from rattlesnake bite depends upon such factors as the location of the bite, amount and toxicity of venom delivered, and the age, health and size of the victim. Bites on the extremities are less serious than bites close to the body trunk.

Rattlesnakes are members of the reptile class. It is believed that long ago the reptiles evolved an egg capable of withstanding desiccation and were the first vertebrates to inhabit the drier regions of the world. So it is not surprising to find many varieties of rattlesnakes existing in the desert regions of the American West. However, rattlesnakes occur not only in deserts, but in mountains, on plains, and even in the jungles of South America. Their range is unique to the Americas, being found from southern Canada to central Argentina. There are 30 species and numerous races, with a large number occurring in the U.S. A few species have transverse bands, but most are characterized by blotched spots resembling diamonds or hexagons on a lighter background, generally grey or light brown, with some having shades of orange, pink, red, or green.

The species of rattlesnake that inhabits the Sierra Nevada, *Crotalus viridis*, is more commonly known as the western rattlesnake. It is the range's only poisonous reptile. They may attain a length of five feet with a five-inch body girth. They appear yellowish or grayish brown with large dark brown or black blotches along their backs. The western rattlesnake is not the biggest of rattlesnakes nor is it considered to have the most toxic venom, but it is still very dangerous. Bigger snakes have more venom and larger fangs to penetrate flesh more deeply. The largest rattlesnake in the U.S., the eastern diamondback (*C.adamanteus*), occurs in the southeastern states and may attain a length of 8 feet and weigh up to 24 pounds. The western diamondback (*C. atrox*) is almost as large as the eastern variety and occurs from Texas to southeastern California.

Some species of rattlers have venom which is more toxic than others. The Mojave rattlesnake (*C. scutulatus*) of the southern California desert regions has the most toxic venom of any rattler in the U.S., but because of the amount delivered to its victims is not considered the most dangerous. Despite the fact that their venom is not a strong one, the eastern and western diamondbacks are considered the most dangerous because of their large size and high venom delivery. The venom of these snakes primarily attacks blood vessels and muscles. The most dangerous rattlesnakes of all are the relatives of the South American rattler (*C. durissus terrificus*) because of their large size and extremely powerful venom which attacks the nervous system.

Western rattlesnakes are most common in the Sierra at lower elevations where they live in grasslands, brushy areas, and rock outcrops. They prefer the warmer and drier regions, but they have also been seen at 9,000 and 10,000 feet, with one recorded observation at 11,000 feet. At these elevations they are not considered to be a great threat to humans since they are seldom encountered.

Rattlesnakes are cold blooded and maintain optimal body temperature by moving between areas of shade and sunshine. During hot summer days they are active only at dawn, dusk, and night. The heat from too much sunshine can be fatal, and a cold snap can leave them lethargic and vulnerable to their enemies. In late fall when temperatures drop, rattlers seek dens among rocky crevices or in caves where they remain dormant from about October through March. Their dens may contain anywhere from a few to a hundred or more rattlers. These dens are usually found on southern slopes which are favored by the warmth of the sun. The snakes come out of dormancy when the outside temperature reaches about 70 degrees Fahrenheit, or sometime in March if they are in the foothills. Activity peaks in spring, especially May. Mating occurs shortly after emergence with the female retaining the fertilized eggs. In late summer she gives birth to 1 to 14 offspring, each about one foot long.

There are certain precautions one can take to avoid running into rattlesnakes and risking a bite. Here are some suggestions:

Know the area you are going into, and whether or not it is rattlesnake habitat. Rattlers are most active in moderate temperatures. On hot days they seek the shade. On cool days they seek the sun's rays or objects warmed by the sun. Most snake bites involve hidden or resting snakes. The victim often doesn't see the snake before the accident. Avoid hiking through heavy chaparral, brush, or grass. When on trails, glance ahead and watch for concealed snakes lying along or next to the trail. Watch your step when crossing logs or jumping rocks since rattlers like to hide under such objects. When climbing rocks don't put your hands where you cannot see. Ledges provide both shaded and sunny areas which rattlers like. Never put your hands into any kind of a hole or near a crevice which you can not see into. Avoid crawling on the ground in areas which are not clear of grass or brush. A bite in the face, neck, or trunk is extremely serious. Consider wearing heavy gloves and high boots when working in rattlesnake infested areas. Thick clothes prevent the snake's fangs from penetrating deeply into the flesh.

Be alert for the "buzz" sound of a rattler's rattling rail. The snake is ready to strike. But don't depend on this warning. They have been known to strike without first rattling, especially if stepped on or surprised. When you hear a rattler, don't panic. Make sure the direction you move is away from the snake and not

Gordon Wiltsie photo

Gordon Wiltsie photo

closer, possibly within its striking range.

Camp in cleared areas away from brush, tall grass, or rock piles. Don't walk around camp in darkness. If it's necessary to move around after dark, use a bright flashlight and wear boots. Don't leave boots or clothes where a rattler can crawl inside them. Exercise caution when picking up firewood, turning over rocks, and picking wild berries or flowers. Carefully examine watering holes or springs before you drink.

Don't let the rattlesnake keep you away from the Sierra, for chances are good that you won't encounter one. But remember that they may be present, and that they deserve respect because they are potentially dangerous creatures. □

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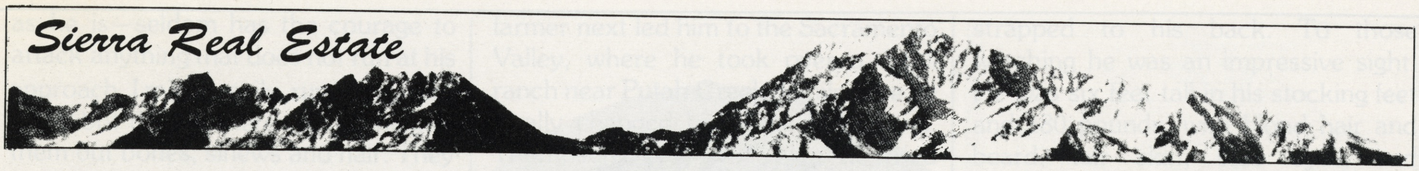

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SNOWSHOE THOMPSON

by Norman McLeod

Throughout the mining camps of the Sierra region, he was known as "Snowshoe" Thompson. He was "the hero of Northern California," with Viking blood that raced through his veins from the exertion of great strides through slow packing snow.

It was midwinter of 1857: Thompson was not a man to frighten easily, and besides, he had a job to do. He was crossing Hope Valley, and in all the vast sweeps of the Sierra Nevada Mountains he was alone. Should he fall and break a leg it would be the end of him, but such a thought never entered his mind. Confidence surged in him like a great tide. He had crossed these ranges often and knew the valleys and passes like no man before him.

Just ahead of him in a snow-filled clearing were the sounds and the sight of possible trouble. This threat to his peace of mind angered him; he was unaccustomed to any sudden challenge to his routine traversing of the granite ridges. His stride shortened and then he stopped altogether. Ahead of him the snarling wolf pack had not yet seen him. They were six wild and powerful creatures—timber wolves—feeding on a deer carcass, snapping at one another and flaunting their vicious fangs.

Thompson recalled his childhood in Norway and hearing his father's scary tales about ferocious wolf packs that roamed the outback until he feared them more than any other animal. (*Editor's note: Wolves, which once roamed the Sierra, are not found in California today.*)

Now for the first time in his life he was facing them, unarmed. "They were great, gaunt, shaggy fellows," he said later. "My course lay near them. I knew I must show a bold front. All my life I had heard that the wolf—savage and cruel as he is—seldom has the courage to attack anything that does not run at his approach. I might easily run away from bears but these—there was nothing to them but bones, sinews and hair. They could skim over snow like birds."

He edged forward slowly. Then the wolves saw him. They growled savagely as they abandoned their carcass and advanced toward him in single file, as though their intent was to encircle him. He dared not reveal the least sign of fear, but instead reverted to his original fast pace toward them, his gaze fixed on the pack leader.

Then that animal did a strange thing. It wheeled about and sat abruptly on its haunches. The wolf behind it did the same, then another, until all six beasts were seated in a line like trained soldiers.

"I pledge you my words, I thought the devil was in them!" he remembered. "To look at them gave me cold chills, and I had a queer feeling about the roots of my hair."

Despite his fear he did not hesitate. When he was opposite them the pack leader threw back his head and gave out a loud and chilling howl, to be followed quickly by the other wolves.

"A more doleful and terrifying sound I never heard," he said. "I thought it meant my death. Every moment I expected the whole pack to dash at me. However, I did not alter my gait nor change my line of march. I passed the file of wolves as a general moves along in front of his troops. When they saw that their war cry did not make me run they feared to come after me, so they let me pass."

This man, who in his time became a living legend, was born at Upper Tins, Prestijeld, Norway, on April 30, 1827. His name at birth was Jon Torsteinson Rui. When ten years old Jon came to America with his family, first settling on a farm in Illinois. A year later the father led them to Missouri and three years after that took them to Iowa where they remained until 1845, when they returned to Illinois.

In 1851, when he was 24 years old, Jon left his family for the gold fields of California, stopping at Hangtown (now Placerville). He tried mining at Coon Hollow and Kelsey's Diggings but found it not to his liking. His instincts as a farmer next led him to the Sacramento Valley, where he took over a small ranch near Putah Creek. While here he legally changed his name to John A. Thompson. For two years he tried ranching, but did not find it a satisfying lifestyle. His eyes turned ever eastward toward the high, snow-topped mountain peaks that reminded him of his homeland.

In 1855 a *Sacramento Union* headline caught his eye: "People Lost to the World. Uncle Sam Needs a Mail Carrier." A postman was needed badly during the winter months to pick up U.S. mail at Placerville and deliver it to Genoa, a Mormon settlement on the eastern edge of the Sierras, a distance of 90 miles. Apparently nobody wanted the job.

Thompson was splitting oak logs on his ranch when an inspiration seized him. Recalling his boyhood years in Norway, he chipped out two ten-foot staves, four inches wide with points 13 1/2 inches long in front. In the middle he fastened bootstraps. These he called "snow-shoes" but in reality they were skis, as we now know them. When completed, his new "shoes" weighed a ponderous 25 pounds, but Thompson's great strength together with his eagerness to apply for the postman's job ruled out any effort to fashion a lighter pair. (Thompson's original skis are displayed today in the local museum at Johnsville, California.)

With his new skis hanging on his back he traveled to Placerville, where he occupied himself for several days by practicing on the snow slopes near the town. Finally, he felt ready to exhibit his skills to the townspeople. Mounted upon the skis, he astounded his watchers with his amazing downhill speed and turns, all the time balancing himself with a long pole held horizontally in his hands. He occasionally used the staff to slow himself by dragging it at his side, sending up a spray of snow. His demonstration was most impressive on the steep mountain faces, swaying from side to side with his long balance-pole, at speeds up to sixty miles per hour.

Thompson applied for the job that nobody wanted and got it. In January, 1856, he undertook his first trek over the mountains, with a heavy mail bag strapped to his back. To those watching he was an impressive sight. He was six feet tall in his stocking feet and 180 pounds, with blond hair and beard, fair skin, blue eyes, and handsome features. He looked the picture of a sea-roving Norse Viking of ancient times.

He wore only a jacket for warmth with a few dried biscuits and a handful of jerked beef for sustenance. Gamblers in town wagered with attractive odds that he would never be seen alive again.

The gamblers were wrong. In five days he was back, having glided and climbed over snow drifts from 30 to 50 feet deep. It took him three days to reach Genoa and two days to ski back, 45 miles a day, mostly downhill.

Through the balance of that winter Thompson continued his mail-carrying job into the mountains. His was the only land communication between the eastern states and California. He never failed his mission, regardless of the ferocity of winter storms. Despite the immediate threat of blinding blizzards he always departed from Placerville on schedule, and returned as punctually.

At that time the Sierra passes were unfamiliar. There were no foot-trodden trails through the forest-filled ridges and valleys. Even if there were they would have been buried under snow fields and unrecognizable. Thompson fearlessly penetrated the mountain ramparts, never following a precise route. When a warm sun melted the snow into soft stickiness that clung to his heavy skis, making progress impossible, he dug himself a protective snow cave and rested or slept until that night's cold temperature produced a supporting crust on the drifts. He often traveled at night.

"I was never lost—I can't be lost," was his modest claim to one interviewer. "Something in my head keeps me right." He was a man of nature; he read the stars, the trees, the moss and lichens on rocks, the flow of streams and drift of snows, the tracks of animals. At first he carried a pistol for protection against wild beasts but later discarded it as useless weight.

Though grizzly bears in that era were numerous, Thompson never encountered one in the twenty winters

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he worked the Sierra. "I saw plenty tracks," he said. "Sometimes I was so close to them I could smell the odor they left behind."

Snowshoe Thompson carried mail loads of up to 80 pounds; one winter, when he carried mail for the Chorpenning Stage Line, his loads often weighed more than 100 pounds. On one occasion he undertook a possible shortcut to Carson Valley on the eastern slope, a route he had scouted only partially. After skiing through an unknown pass he found himself facing a steep precipice, the wall of a deep canyon through which a river coursed. Letting nothing intimidate him, he was forced to carry his 80-pound mail sack, heavy skis and balance pole as he painfully worked himself down the steep precipice, crossed the river and crawled up the other side. When he reached the top he confessed later to being "nearly tired out."

That night he made camp under a big pine tree, one with a deep pit at its roots into which he crawled, after making himself a bed of boughs. While he slept it snowed to a depth of two feet. Awakening, he found himself buried under a white blanket. He forced his bulk through the snow and emerged in bright daylight. Then came the realization that he had slept through the night as snugly warm as if he had occupied a cozy bed in the best house in the land. After that experience he often made similar camps, having learned firsthand the secret of winter hibernation.

In Hermit Valley on the eastern slope were deserted cabins, some of which he occasionally used for overnight stays. Sometimes the structures were buried completely by drifts so that it was necessary for him to locate them by probing through the snow with his balance-pole. He was then obliged to find a way into the house—no easy task. At first he'd try to get inside by crawling down the chimneys but his bulk discouraged this. Eventually he settled upon a procedure whereby he would dig down to the cabin's roof, then tear some boards loose and crawl inside.

In all his experience Thompson never suffered from cold or frostbite. "I never had my feet, or even my fingers or ears frozen," he said. "I was more troubled with too great warmth than with cold. The heavy pack on my back and my vigorous exercise kept me warm."

He experienced countless blizzards so heavy with snow he could scarcely see ahead. If the storm occurred at night he would not expose himself to being buried in the drifts but would find a flat rock blown clean by the wind on which he would dance old Norwegian folk dances by the hour to keep from freezing.

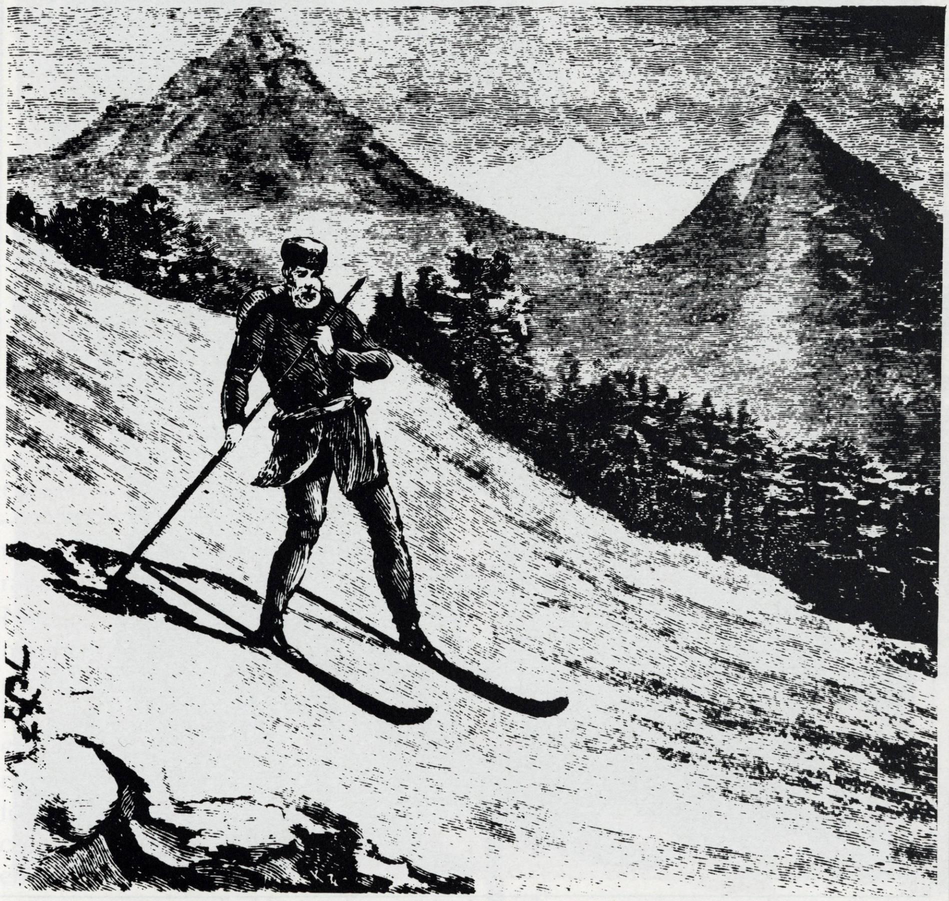
Snowshoe Thompson is credited with saving the lives of many lost men in the mountain fastness. He once found a man who had been wandering for four days in Lake Valley, completely lost. Another time he saved the life of James Sisson, who had lain inside a deserted cabin for twelve days with boots frozen to his feet, subsisting on nothing but raw flour. When Thompson found him, Sisson's legs were purple to the knees. The poor fellow was sure he would die and had tried unsuccessfully to chop off his legs with an axe. After making the man as comfortable as he could, Thompson departed for Genoa where he found help and returned to the cabin to carry Sisson, with great difficulty, down to the Carson Valley.

In Genoa a doctor announced it was necessary to amputate both of Sisson's feet, but he refused to work without chloroform and there was none in the small town. So Thompson, despite his recent exertions, at once set out on his skis to cross the Sierra and travel all the distance to Sacramento for the required drug. This round trip of approximately 280 miles took him five days, an average of 56 miles per day—an incredible achievement. Sisson lost both feet but survived.

Thompson is credited with carrying the original ore samples to Sacramento for assay that led to the extraordinary silver strike on the fabulous Comstock Lode in Nevada.

During the spring of 1860 Thompson experienced another kind of adventure which nearly cost him his life. While visiting Virginia City he was caught in the Paiute Indian War. A fierce battle between the Indians and 105 whites—mostly volunteers—was fought near Pyramid Lake on May 12. The whites were cut down in a clever ambush and before the fracas was over, 76 of them were dead, including their popular leader, Major Ormsby of Carson City. Thompson was in the thick of the fight, having his horse shot out from under him. In the general retreat he struck out south with other survivors. As he ran, a riderless, fully saddled horse followed him closely, as if frightened and seeking protection. Another fleeing man called to him: "Why don't you get on that horse and save yourself?"

Thompson did so and escaped from the frenzied Paiutes who pursued the volunteers for nearly 20 miles, killing all they caught. He always believed that the Lord had saved his life by sending him that horse.

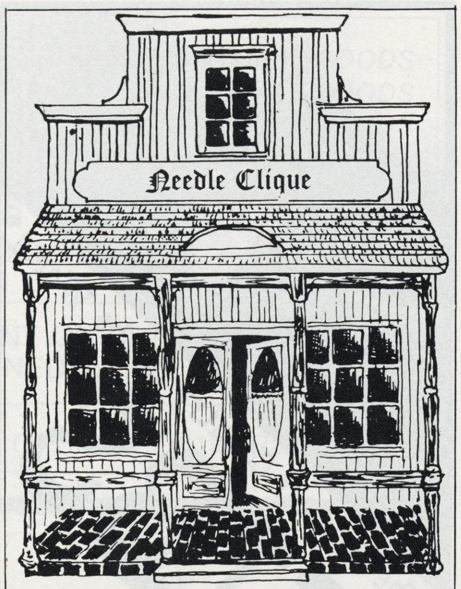

An engraving of Snowshoe Thompson from *Thayer's Marvels of the New West*, 1887

During 1861-62 he contracted to carry the U.S. mails from Murphys Camp, California, to Genoa by way of the Big Trees and what later became the towns of Markleeville and Woodfords. This was a longer route, with its starting point south of Placerville.

Snowshoe Thompson was a person whose mission in life seemed to be one of sacrifice and hard work, suffering many hardships for little or no pay. More idealist than businessman, he often performed his duties without contract, relying trustingly on gentlemen's agreements for remuneration. When the Chorpenning Stage Line contracted for carrying the mail it was Thompson again who came to its aid when the roads were blocked with snow drifts. Chorpenning failed, and Thompson never received a dime for his services.

In summer Thompson was able to barely support his wife and son by driving stages, helping erect sawmills or delivering mail and supplies to remote mining camps. Once the business of mail carrying worked into an annual undertaking, he moved from Putah Creek to Diamond Valley, located just off today's Nevada line in Alpine County, California, thirty miles south of Carson City. Here he homesteaded 160 acres close to his beloved mountains.

Thompson continued his heroic services as regular winter mail courier



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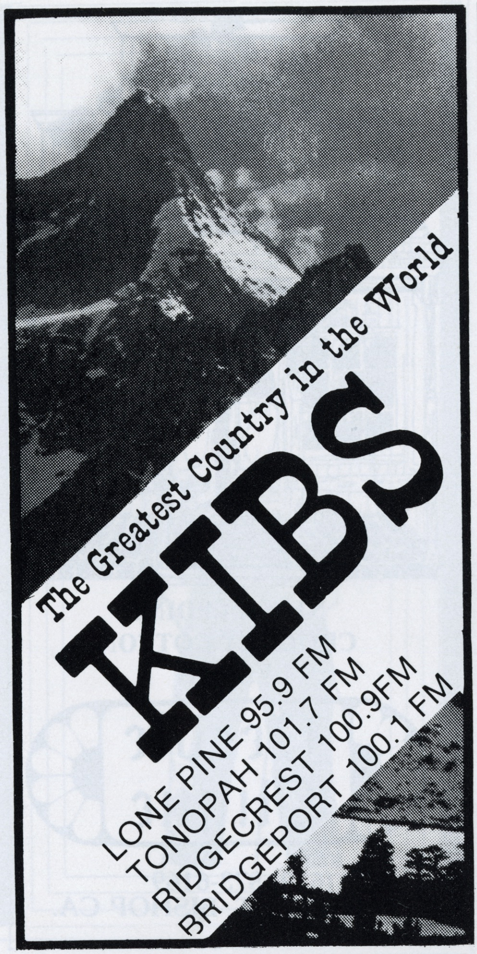

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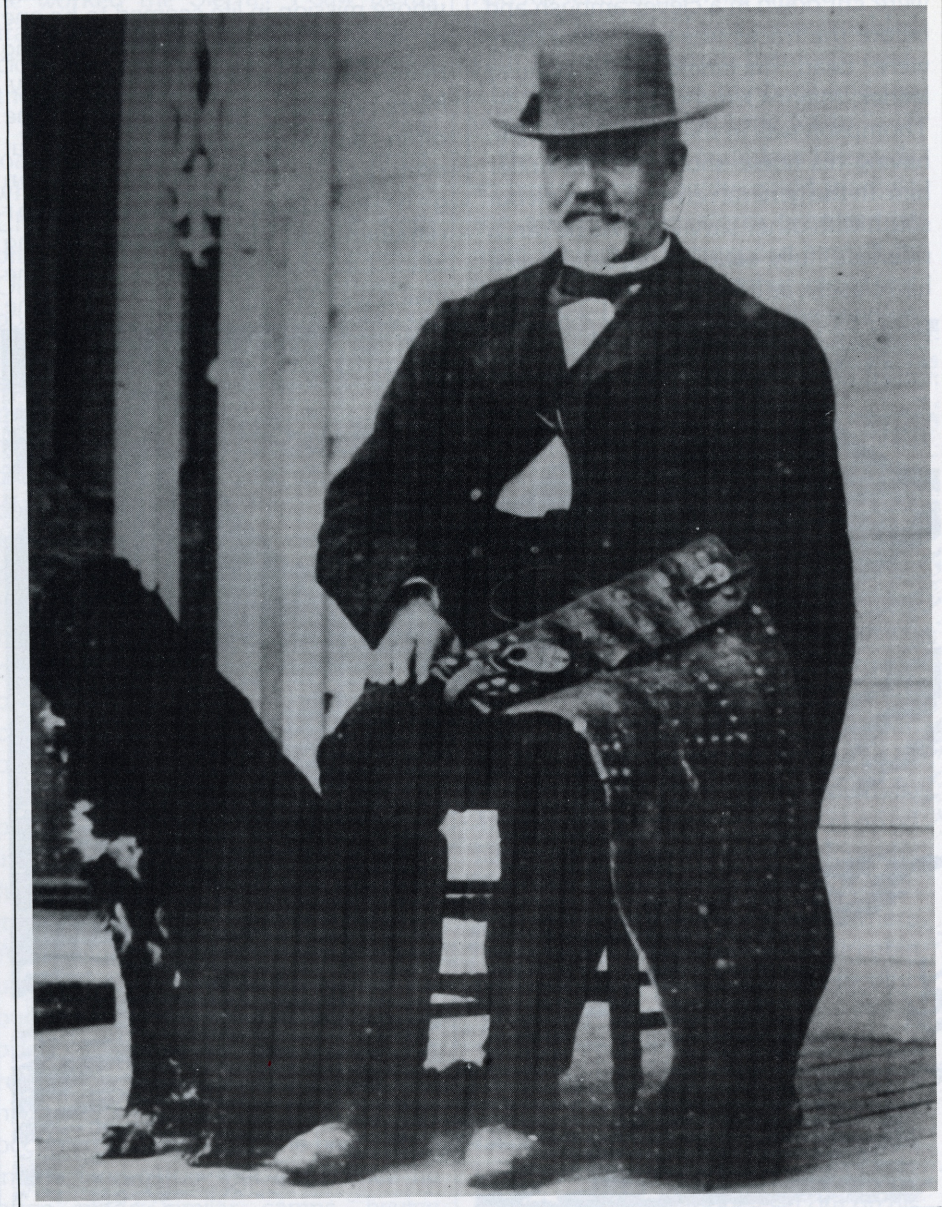

Thompson shortly before his death at age 49.

until the completion of the Central Pacific Railroad in 1869. After that, he maintained his specialized services in carrying mail and supplies for private parties.

Nearing his fiftieth year, Thompson felt strongly that the government owed him something in his declining years. He submitted a petition to Congress for $6,000 for all the services he had performed, quite often at the risk of his life. Nothing happened, so in 1874 he traveled to Washington to personally pursue the matter. Again he received promises, but Congress adjourned without acting on his claim.

Discouraged, he returned to his Diamond Valley ranch where he died after a short illness on May 15, 1876. He was 49. The diagnosis was that he had died from a "liver derangement." He was buried in Genoa, Nevada. His only child, Arthure, died two years later at the age of eleven and lies beside his father. At the time of his death Thompson was a member of the Board of Commissioners of Alpine County. He gave the appearance of a man of good education and his handwriting was described as "bold and beautiful."

A biography of Snowshoe Thompson was written ten years after his passing by Dan DeQuille, a contemporary of Mark Twain on the staff of the *Territorial Enterprise* in Virginia City. DeQuille paid his subject this fitting

For a time, the legendary Norwegian was the only wintertime means of communication between the Carson Valley and the outside world.

tribute: "He was the father of all the race of snow-shoers in the Sierra Nevada Mountains; and in those mountains he was the pioneer of the pack train, the stage coach, and the locomotive. On the Pacific Coast his equal in his peculiar line will probably never again be seen. . . It would be hard to find another man combining his courage, physique and powers of endurance—a man with such thews and sinews, controlled by such a will."

Thompson's memory lives on. In 1976, 100 years after his death, a larger-than-life welded statue was erected in his honor by the Sons of Norway at Boreal Ridge, on Interstate 80 near the Donner Summit in California. The statue depicts Thompson in his role of intrepid winter mail carrier, with pack on his back, head up, knees bent in a half-crouch, long balance pole held firmly, with skis exactly as he carved them.

Perhaps longer lasting than this monument are the legends of this Norseman's raw courage, self-sacrifice, and prowess with snow skis which have filtered down through the years, fulfilling the prophecy etched on his grave marker: "Gone—but not forgotten." ☐

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WALKING UP AND DOWN IN THE WORLD

Smoke Blanchard, a revered figure in mountaineering circles, has spent five decades roaming the Sierra and other mountain ranges of the world. A contemporary and friend of such legendary mountain men as Norman Clyde and Jules Eichorn, Blanchard has lived and hiked in the Eastern Sierra for most of his life. His autobiography, WALKING UP AND DOWN IN THE WORLD, spans the entire modern history of climbing in America. In the following selections from the book, Blanchard recounts tales from the Buttermilk, a celebrated mountaineering area near Bishop, and in a letter from Nepal, outlines his trekking creed.

By Smoke Blanchard

BUTTERMILKING

"Hey, Smoke, got time to go Buttermilking?"

(You) should know me better than that. I've always got time to go Buttermilking. That's our coined verb for climbing in the local rocks. Please don't call it practice climbing. This is the real thing, even if it's walking. (We sometimes go Buttermilking to study flowers or to meditate.) And it's not bouldering; that's another sport. For forty years Buttermilking has been as essential a part of my life as any other ingredient.

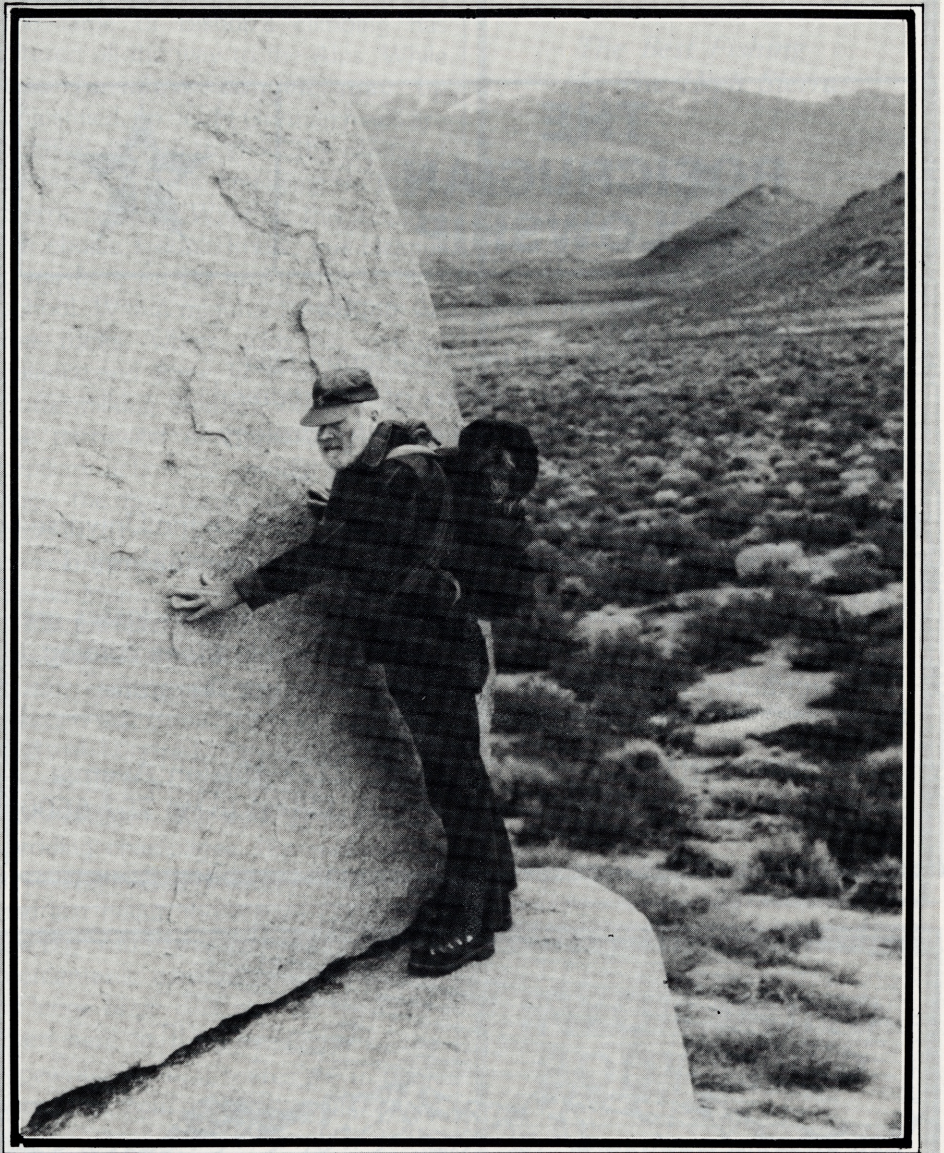
No one knows the origin of the name *Buttermilk*. We borrowed it from the USGS, who splashed it across a large swath of the Sierra slope on one of their maps. Climbing locals restrict its use to a particular parade of small peaks.

The rock course evolved over a long time. I first climbed the Big Slab Pinnacle by the vertical four-sided chimney at its back, the one I now call the Aboriginal Chimney, in 1942. For many years, I corkscrewed into the great rock maze from all directions. The twistings and turnings of the holes, hollows, chimneys, and prongs of this vast jumble curl so complexly that even today I am the only one who can follow the exact pattern of all the routes. (My son) Bobby has been with me on more scramblings there than anyone, but he has always climbed as follower and has not yet learned the course. People who have spent a couple of years of winter weekends there still lose the way.

Obviously this is a source of pride to me, because mountaineering is an extension of my love of geography and exploring. The Buttermilk, though, taught me an appreciation of the grace of rockclimbing. Surprisingly, it seems to be this new skill that has gained this clumsy guide his local fame. Most people don't realize how easy it is to look good on moves done hundreds of times.

For decades I've taken out almost every person who has come visiting here. One beauty of the Buttermilk is that we can get there, climb, and return in just one hour. Or take the whole day. To go through the whole course takes from six to eight hours. Few people have the stamina and hand skin to complete the course in any amount of time; fewer yet can do it in record time. Climbing for records is stupid, anyway. It means no leisurely discussions on a sun-loved ledge, no time for trying a pitch over and over to smooth a technique, no chance to watch an owl mother's flight lesson, no ear for coyote music. (On my wife Su's first arrival at the second highest summit, she asked, "Why do you call this one Coyote Singing Summit?" Believe it or not, on cue with that stage direction, an obliging chorus proved the name appropriate.) It is good when one or six show up with time and determination to make a deliberately slow tour through all twelve pinnacles on the course.

Better yet is a big picnic, which Su used to refer to as a "Buttermilk Bash." This means a general circus for all, sans program. A large but not atypical one gathered its population from Bishop locals, Allen Steck and colleagues from the Mountain Travel Company, and Yvon Chouinard and his crew from the Great Pacific Iron Works. The count was fifty-one, which may have included some dogs and most certainly included babes in arms. Maybe even George Miller's children's milk goats. That's okay. That is the special feature of Buttermilk ambience: the possibility of assembling in rock-inspired communion all categories of outdoor people from the most sedentary of picnickers (nonambulatory, even) to the most acrobatic of overhanging boulderers.



The author, with friend, bouldering in the Buttermilk *Gordon Wiltsie photo*

Picnic Valley, twenty minutes by easy trail from the new sandpit parking lot just ten miles from 387 Willow Street, is as spectacular as any site in cragdom. It is not really a valley, just a picnic wide sagebrush-and-boulder-strewn space between the frowning brow of the bold Big Owl Pinnacle, the overhanging wall of South Mount Klieforth, and the sheer cliffs of Big Slab Pinnacle. Here nonclimbers can laze in sight of friends who are clinging to walls and peaks on every side. The haul from the car is short enough that nonclimbing types can be persuaded to pack in the food and water and wine, so that climbers arriving over the Skin Diver, Henry's Hill, and other narrow, airy places can balance unburdened.

Because the usual course crosses twice through this valley, people committed to different routes can mix at lunch. Groups may use this recess to rearrange. Here are some granite gropers eager for chimney wrestling; here, kids bound for Mount Klieforth on a tight rope; there, upper-echelon athletes dangling from an overhang. When such madness was popular, two young guides streaked a mixed climbing party that was belaying its way up the Slab. Bobby topped the streakers by traversing the complicated

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route over the summit, down the rough backside chimney, and around by Patterson's Night Route and the Belly Tester Crevice—fully clothed but barefooted!

Regarding climbing costumes, I tell visitors freshly arrived from the city, "We used to say, 'Put on your old clothes, we're going to the Buttermilk.' But now we say, 'Wear your best suit. If your technique is correct, you won't hurt it!' " This latest advice recognizes the skills we acquired at keeping ourselves out from the rock and climbing using only feet and hands. Beginners tend to grovel in chimneys, which is detrimental to clothing. Buttermilk rock is rough, round, and relatively holdless. It requires different gymnastics than the high-mountain rocks and allows us habitues to look good.

It is hard to say who will look good on those shaggy round bulges or tight scratch cracks. I must hasten to add an important message: the Buttermilk Course has always been just for fun. We have but one rule: don't fall off. Confucius say: "He who fall from Buttermilk rock loses face (very scratchy granite)." The credit to be gained from completing the course or reaching the summit of any of the twelve major pinnacles? As Bodhidharma answered the Emperor Wu of Liang to his inquiry on the merit of religious works: "None whatever!"

Still, if part of the fun is perfecting one's grace and balance, then surely it is legitimate to observe and appreciate one's companions' efforts as well. The peculiar nature of that strange rock leads to many a surprise. Sometimes mountaineers of wide experience and great reputation come around and find the rock so unlike the clean-cut edges of the heights that they struggle embarrassingly. Among the hundreds of nonclimbers trying the rocks with me, there have been some surprises too.

A couple from one of my African trips showed up, and the woman was anxious to get back into rockclimbing. She had kletterschuhe and knew how to use them. Her man, though, wore shiny, brass-buckled, leather-soled fashion boots. Impossible footgear: the uppers would be ruined by gouging crystals, and the soles could skid a man to ruin. He was told to wait at the bottom of the Porcupine Pinnacle, but he got so excited watching us, he came anyway. He climbed perfectly safely and with consummate skill.

The "Ring-tailed Cat Man" was a guest lecturer at the Palisade School of Mountaineering. A shy, gangling, stringy, black-stubble-bearded, frizzy-headed speaker, who scuffed his toes in the dirt, stared at the ground, and mumbled inaudibly about high-altitude squirrel habitats, Derham Giuliani is most comfortable with a high-camp audience held in the glow of his nocturnally bloodshot eyes. (He earned his nickname by staying up nights observing ring-tailed cats.) One climbing team of two clients, who hunkered by a small fire at Camp Robin Hood for a two-hour nature lesson, rated the encyclopedic animal lore, detailed with red-eyed intensity, the highlight of their entire week at the school. They were startled the next day (it's happened more than once) to catch sight of the loose-jointed cat man flapping by with his untied tennies and butterfly net right up through the course they were attacking roped, belayed, and protected. Yes, the Ring-tailed Cat Man also floats up knee-gouging Buttermilk cracks with perfect unconcern.

My old friend Bob Swift once showed up with a friend who looked over each pitch very carefully and then climbed with ballet beauty. From the top of the short chimney above Sharp's Scenic Stroll, I threw down a rope for the stranger's protection on that airy promenade. He tied on without a word and came up with his usual aplomb.

When Swift got a chance, he inquired critically, "My God, Smoke, do you know who you tossed the line to?"

"I didn't catch the last name," I lied. "Chuck somebody."

"That's Chuck Pratt, perhaps the third-best rockclimber in all the world!"

He's a gentleman. The famous Stroll is a little nerve-tingling, but I'm sure he crossed it roped only to be polite.

One who should have worn a rope a time or two was our most spectacular climber of all. Helmut Kiene, in selecting a high-school exchange program from his native Germany, chose Bishop. A few locals imagine that the fame of Bishop's climbing has filtered all the way to the Alps. While this harmless conceit may be unjustified, no doubt German maps are detailed enough to show the capital of eastern California snuggling up to the Sierra Nevada. Whether this inspired his choice I don't know, but Helmut came here for his senior year of high school. Within minutes he was out on the rocks, where with his natural balance and grace, he fit perfectly into Buttermilking. Skinny enough to rise up the narrowest of chimneys as if by capillary action, he was tall enough to finger the most distant hold and strong enough to hoist himself with ease. Soon he scampered up problem pitches like Spider Man.

His unroped antics nearly did him in one day, though. It was the great day Susan Denton and Jay Jensen were married just below the cragged peaks, and with hundreds of their friends at the ceremony it was not difficult to recruit Buttermilkers. We were all fairly full of wedding champagne, but rucksacked in several magnums in case of need. We had just begun the regular descent of the Big Slab Pinnacle when the bubbly momentarily captured Helmut's toes-on-ledge brain cells and off he came. Even here at the safe stance of the typewriter table, it scares me to think about that flight over those cliffs. There is one small, round, boulder ledge between take-off point and pancaking bottom. Helmut landed there in perfect knee-sprung crouch, bowed to the crowd as if twenty-five-foot jumps were on his program, and sprang down into the vertical chimney out of sight below in perfect control.

For a quarter of a century I knew everyone I saw out there, and for half of that time the only human tracks in all those hills were mine or my chosen companions'. Even today most of the traffic aims for bouldering on Doug Robinson's Peabodies. He hung that name on them and hung up most of the routes while spending weeks exploring their problems. Over a score of Yosemite hotshots have been attracted by Doug's boulder broadcasting. It is not my thing. I put on Doug Robinson's special rockclimbing shoes once and aimed them for Grandpa, but they

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didn't take me up. Bobby uses mountain boots like mine and climbs routes on Grandma and Grandpa that no one can follow.

The huge boulder Doug named Grandpa is famous now—featured in a photograph illustrating a Robinson essay on clean climbing. Most people think bold Grandpa the biggest boulder around the Buttermilk area. It is second. Number one we hide by geography and benign neglect. We hid it because the only way up will require bolts, and so far we've kept bolts out of almost all our rocks. Locals laugh because the rope in the Grandpa clean-climbing photo runs through a bolt, but that's okay because all agree that Doug is certified pure, and the editor needed the picture.

If we've only an hour or the new visitors want to climb only one pinnacle, I usually head for the first peak of the course, the one we call the Porcupine. That way we can use the old parking place, below where the weekend cars park. . .

The Porcupine Pinnacle gives us a chance to climb cracks, faces, ledges, and chimneys. Most likely I'll give a running commentary on all the different types of jam and cling holds we use. I'll demonstrate a jump we call the Flying Squirrel, teach mantelling, show how to wedge, and give an example of the lieback. Probably there will be philosophy, deep or shallow; undoubtedly there will be gossip about famous climbers. I'll criticize Royal Robbins for claiming to have invented the elbow lock in the 1950's. I hope he meant that he had progressed far enough in his climbing experience and athletic agility to rediscover what my friend Gary Leech showed me in the 1930's, when he rediscovered what A.F. Mummery had probably used early in this century in his famous crack on the Grepon, and what no doubt was used before him by old Pithecanthropus J. Erectus when he deserted his tree to try a little rock-crack problem in pursuit of dinner.

There will be many anecdotes. A lot of them I tell to illustrate something about climbing in Buttermilk. When we thrash in the chimneys, I point out that they come in all sizes, like people. The beanpoles gripe in Charcoal Chimney,

Blanchard relaxes with a kalimba (or thumb piano) in the Palisade Sierra. *Su Blanchard photo*

the shortlegged have trouble reaching across the wide chimney under the Breakfast Porch. The Frog Wedge is supposed to require great arm strength, but Mary Sharp and Marlene Miller squirm out of it on coordination rather than biceps. I tell how the first two guys to straddle-leg the entire Bobcat's Passage were tall, skinny Tex Mock and a sawed-off Yvon Chouinard. I may offer the rope with a story about how Bob Swift and I assured a client at the climbing school that "you can't fall out of a chimney," and she did.

If all goes well, my chatter sparks my friends into talking too, and we jabber all the way. This uses up climbing time and leaves some unclimbed pinnacles to beckon them back.

If I charted every hold, mapped every move on the course, asterisked all the alternatives, compiled a large book with the most accurate evocations of the moods of that molded granite paradise, and managed accurately to portray by character sketches the people who sometimes inhabit the Buttermilk, I would still sell it short. There is no way that I know of to pass on by paper the feeling that permeates the person who steps out of the shower with epidermis cleaned and tingling from crystal scrapes, muscles pleasantly tired, joints well-oiled, and mind and spirit glowing from a full day of Buttermilking.

WHY I TREK

Some trips have a way of flipping over in midcourse, and such a one is this. We've been hobnobbing with some of the world's best mountains for a short and cloud-hung day or two, but most of our march to and from the Sanctuary has been in rain slopped over from the monsoon. The anxiety of watching each greasy stone footstep has been aggravated by leeches. Would you believe eight at once? On one shoe? Eight leeches bobbing and weaving and reaching ankleward. Bend over to get them: aversion to creepy crawlers makes for a clumsy grab. Panic scratches the backbone. This time catch them, but one flicked around and hung to my thumb. Collected two more on wrist from rubbing by a bush. Umbrella falls in mud. Rain down the back of the neck—and so it goes. First tourist-trots of the season, a slight head cold, clammy clothes, and drippy skies add to the general blah. All this

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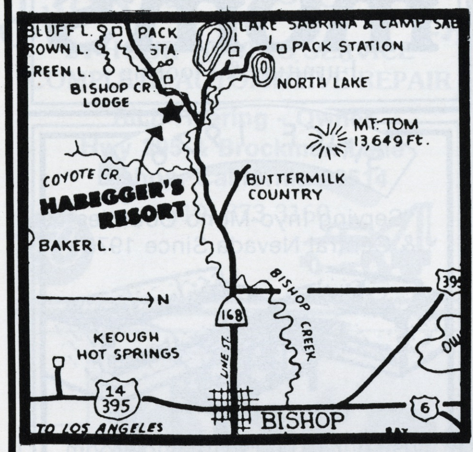

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evaporated like smoke from a puffball this afternoon.

I'm writing this, sitting leechless and dry on top of a mountain. A little mountain, a cow pasture hill, but this is the first time in thirteen days I've been out of my tent after tea! And it isn't raining! Camp is in a green bowl of goat-and-cow pasture 500 feet below me, and on the other side a mile-high cliff plunges to the Kali Gandaki. I can see the river emerging from its celebrated gorge, but the great peaks are hidden in storm. Momentarily the clouds shift and the sun burns on the white top of Dhaulagiri, sparking a faint ambition that has been simmering on the back burner and needs only sunlight on snow to bubble a greed for high mountaineering deep within me. Now it has gone, as clouds recapture the world. They tower in castle cumuli, and fog blots the view to the river. But the fog is a warm breath of India and cures the damp blues instantly. I'm sitting wooled in fog now, but the page is dry, the ink is not smearing, and my oft-used umbrella is folded and furled. I climbed to this window of freedom through pines. Wonderful trees. Of all the woody-stemmed plants of the world, pines are the ones that speak of dryness, of sunshine, of breathable air. Jungles are fine, but the smoky hills, the distant shafts of sunlight, the glimpses of snow, are like the sound of hacksaws slicing through the last cell bar. I've been imprisoned too long in moss and fern and zero-visibility leech swamps.

One of my passengers asked me the other day why I trekked and what I got out of it. It was almost the same question we discussed on the Scheelite Pinnacle last summer. I put the passenger off with, "It's my job; I like it." I'll see if I can write you a better analysis of what I'm up to over here.

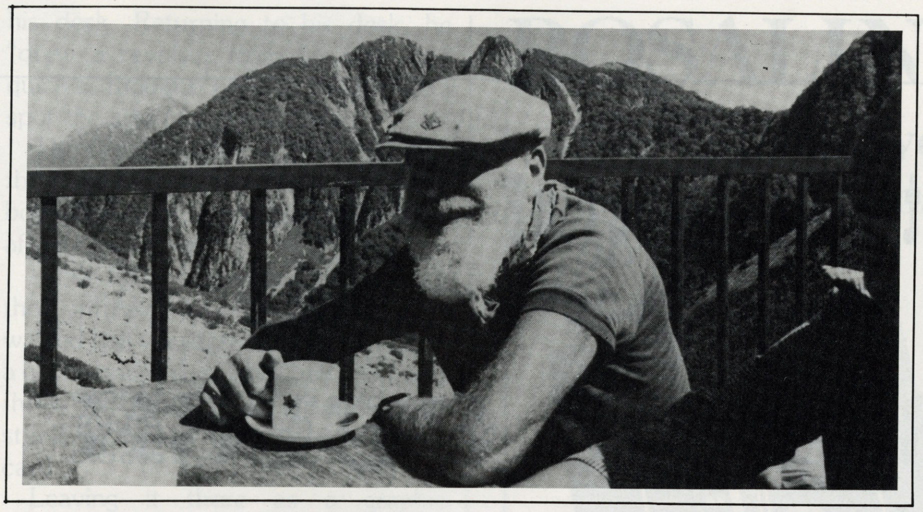
I get out of it health, sufficient wealth to maintain some kind of genteel poverty at home, and good friends. Good friends, of course, are the best advantage. Salary is least important. I've got to have it, but surely I could earn this small amount in the states more easily. Health is not to be sneezed at.

This feeble joke put me right off. I have descended to the tent to dig out my loose-leaf notebook for better arguments. How do you like these? From the *Apocrypha* (Ecclesiasticus 51:70): "Health and a good estate of body are above all gold and a strong body above infinite wealth." And here is another from Confucius: "He who needs only coarse food, water to drink, and as pillow his folded arms will find happiness without further search." Yes, I get out of trekking a set of strong legs. . .

I am now writing several days later. I meant to mail the letter from Beni, but they were having a big ten-day celebration. The streets were full of people dressed in their finery, the bands playing, the stores all shuttered, and the post office deserted.

I have been thinking about why I trek. Although I have to have a job, and it is wonderful to have one that gives me good friends, good travel, and good health, it is not really the reason I keep trekking. The real reason I trek is because of the charge. Because it is a drug trip. Because I get turned on. For several excellent reasons I have never sampled psychedelics, but I know what it means to be turned on. Some things on the road turn me on as if I'd swallowed a neon sign. Now this intoxication doesn't keep me lit constantly, as I tried to explain in the first part of this letter. It is a sporadic but more or less frequent semi-satori that fills me with wonder and delight. That's the work I want. I took delight this morning in the dew diamonds strewn by slanting sun rays down the short green grass of the road. I stopped to stare with delight at a pair of slant-heads. That's my name for water buffaloes. They stand with their heads tipped back. I don't know what they are thinking behind those big black eyes; I wasn't thinking anything profound myself, just how grand and fine they looked. I couldn't help bowing slightly and muttering, "*Namaste.*"

Luckily I am a strong walker, and it is no trouble to catch up with all but the fastest trekkers. Lucky because I can seldom walk along without finding reason to stop and savor another scene. This time it may be a field of marigolds so bright they nearly blind me to the pleasure of ruminating over a roadside cattle trough. A dry hollowed log, its cracked and wrinkled outside



The author sips tea at a hut in the Japan Alps.

and rough-chiseled inside, have an ancient, grizzled, but so natural, look. This contrasts sharply with the transient beauty of the flowers, obviously painted by an artist too splashy with his golds and greens. Today's diet was a multipage menu of delights.

All morning we followed a river. There is no foot-dragger like a swirling, rushing, boiling, sometimes lazing, often whirlpooling, mostly boulder-beating river. Should I sit on my walking stick head for five minutes here to watch the lapping backwater or surge of narrow chute? Would five hours be better? Moving water must be one of the most hypnotic of the Great Magician's tricks.

After noon stop, we climbed up a good, hot, sweat-oozing down-the-nose mountain and topped out among shiny-leaved oaks with half a sky full of glacier-draped peaks.

There seems to be no logic to the category of things that stop me. The list of turn-ons I find along the road includes not only pines and waterfalls and buffaloes and marigolds, but also any view from a steep cliff, all bridges, the iridescent sheen of a rooster's feathers, drum sounds floating up out of a deep valley, children's laughter, shouts of a plowman to his team at furrow's end, any and all bamboos, allelomometism (I looked it up and wrote it in my notebook; it is the wheeling of a flock of birds in unison without an obvious leader), fat, purple fir cones. (If the trees stand below the road, these top-branch juicy-looking fruits are brought to eye level.) And that lower altitude tree, the sacred *Ficus religiosa*, common name *bo* or *pipal*, turns me off the road to sit at the *chautara* (pack rest), to recuperate in leafy shade and contemplate *pipal's* old and gnarled bark.

Speaking of old and gnarled things, I always stop at an old, wrinkled-faced native with white whiskers. He smiles back, I wink, he laughs, and we both pull our beards in camaraderie, good fellowship, and the recognition that we are congratulating each other across the language barrier. We are members of an exclusive club and full of years and wisdom.

That's enough raving. When my friend asked why I trekked, I didn't answer him this way. He didn't want to know anyhow. He just wanted to tell me that he came on the trip to see if he could walk, found out that he could, and please, please, would I congratulate him.

Yes, the mood of this trip has changed. A few days ago, I didn't think of writing down all the good things about trekking. I'll bang this in the box when we go through Beni on the way down. You should get it in three weeks or so. By that time, I'll be off on another trek and thinking that rain is not so bad. Leeches? I can do without them. □

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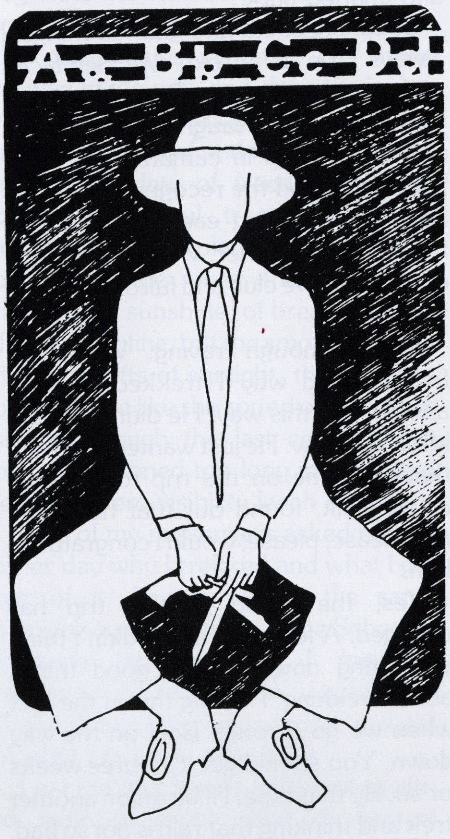
the Conquest of CRANBERRY GULCH

by Shirley W. Belleranti

When Harry Flotoe applied for the vacant position of teacher in Cranberry Gulch's one-room schoolhouse, the school district trustee responded as follows: "Mister, no doubt you have all the learnin' that's required in a school teacher, but it wants more than learnin' to make a man able to teach school in Cranberry Gulch. We've had three who've tried it. . . One lays there in the graveyard, another lost his eye, the last one opened school and left before noontime for the benefit of his health. He hasn't been back since." To put it mildly, the students at Cranberry Gulch were a handful.

Cranberry Gulch was located in the Yuba flats, northeast of Sacramento, and Harry Flotoe's story was originally told in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1881 under the title "The Slim Teacher—How He Managed the School at Cranberry Gulch."

My grandfather, who was teaching in a one-room country schoolhouse at the time, pasted the clipping in his scrapbook. He may have felt a kinship with Harry, or perhaps it was admiration. Whatever the reason, he saved the item and now, a century later, I can share the story with you.



Despite the trustee's warning, Harry insisted he could handle the job. "I know I am slender, but I am tough and I have a strong will," he assured the man. He must have spoken convincingly, because he got the job.

Word of the daring new teacher spread like wildfire. According to the *Chronicle*: ". . . there was a good deal of excitement in the gulch and along the Yuba flats. More than fifty young people of both sexes made an excuse to drop into the tavern to get a sight at the fellow who thought he could keep school in that district, and many a contemptous (sic) glance fell on the slender form and youthful face of the would-be teacher."

When Harry arrived at the school an hour ahead of time the following Monday morning, some of the students were already waiting. They noted he was carrying a valise. "Ready to slope if he finds we're too much for him," chortled an 18-year-old tough.

Seeming not to notice them, Harry unlocked the door and entered the schoolhouse. The students followed, curious to see what their new teacher would do. What happened next must have been a real shock.

Harry set down his valise, then opened it and took out a belt, which he calmly buckled around his waist. Then, according to the report, ". . . he put three Colt's navy revolvers there, each six barrels, and a bowie-knife 18 inches in the blade."

"Thunder! He means business!" the 18-year-old muttered.

Now the roughians were becoming nervous as they watched the teacher take a white card, about four inches square, and tack it to the wall opposite his desk. Returning to his desk, he "drew a revolver from his belt, and quick as thought" fired six bullets into a spot the size of a silver dollar.

The report continued, "By this time the schoolhouse was half full of large boys and girls. The little ones were afraid to come in."

While his pop-eyed students gaped, the intrepid young schoolmaster walked half-way across the room "with a bowie-knife in his hand," wheeled, and threw it "with so true a hand that it stuck, quivering, in the center of the card."

Leaving it there as a graphic reminder, he took two more bowie knives from the valise and stuck them in his belt, then "reloaded his yet smoking pistol." Thus prepared, Harry ordered the 18-year-old to "Ring the bell; I am about to open school." The boy did so without a word.

"The scholars will take their seats," the teacher commanded. "I open school with a prayer."

The chastened students "sat down silently, almost breathless." After the prayer, Harry cocked a revolver and announced, "We will arrange the classes. All who can read, write, and spell will rise."

Six students got up and Harry showed them were to sit. Then, as he continued his examination, he heard a whisper behind him.

"No whispering allowed here!" he thundered, drawing his revolver. "And for an instant," the newspaper report went on, "His revolver lay on a level with the offender's head."

"I'll not do so any more," the boy gasped.

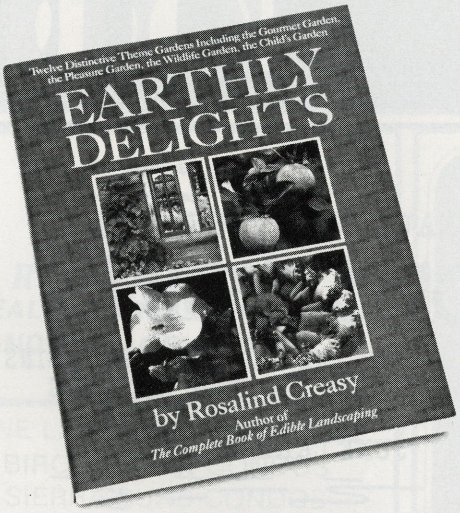
"See you do not," Harry admonished. "I never give a second warning."

The story went on to report that within a month Harry had put away his weapons and "his pupils learned to love as well as to respect him." After the first quarter of the school year his salary was doubled and he taught at Cranberry Gulch for two years.

The reporter who wrote the item for the *Chronicle*, unfortunately unnamed, identified himself as a personal friend of Harry's. In his conclusion, he stated simply: "They had found a man at last who could keep school." ☐

ROSALIND CREASY

"Ask not what you can do for your garden, but what your garden can do for you."*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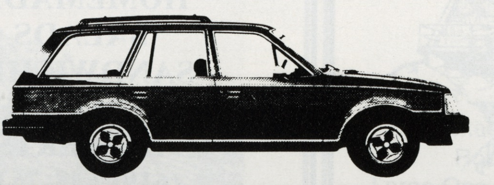

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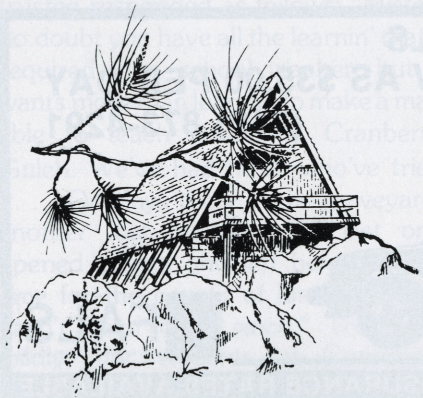

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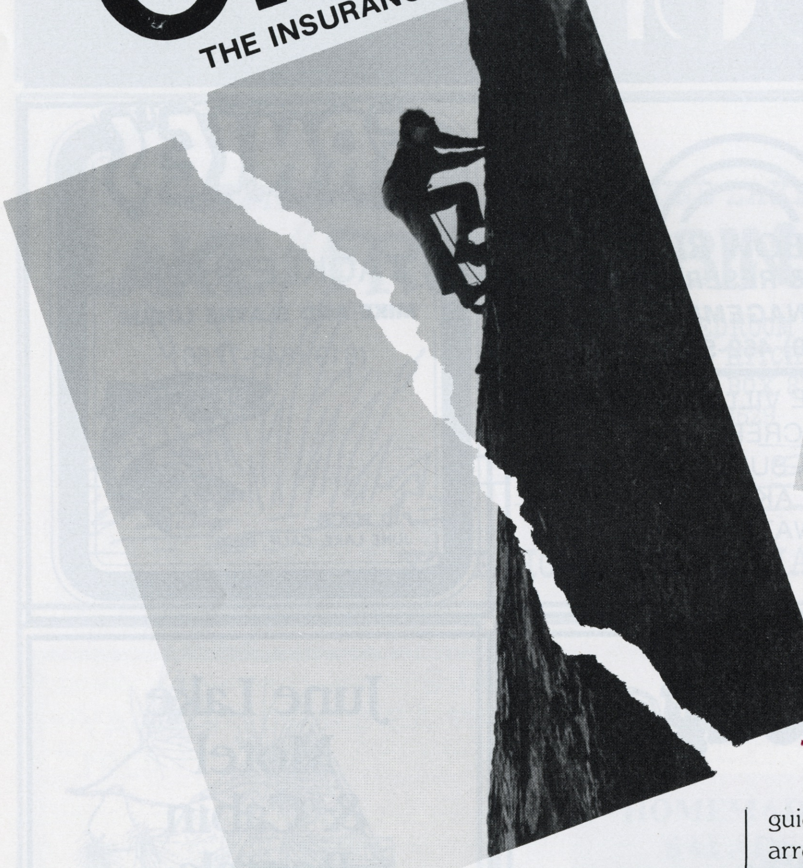

Gordon Wiltsie photos

by Marv Collins

For the first time in 17 years, John Fischer may not be guiding mountaineering trips in the Sierra this summer. Fischer, owner of the Palisade School of Mountaineering in Bishop, has already cancelled over $3,700 worth of guided trips which had been lined up for the coming season. Other Sierra mountaineering guides find themselves in a similar predicament.

The reason for this drastic state of affairs is the sudden unavailability of liability insurance for climbing guides. Last year, one after another, mountaineering guides across the United States were notified by their insurance brokers that their policies would not be renewed. Because most of the guides operate on federal lands, and the federal government requires that those operating on their land indemnify them against liability, the unavailability of liability insurance has made it literally impossible for most mountaineering guides in the United States to conduct their professions legally. Their only alternative under the current situation is outlaw guiding—that is, guiding without insurance and risking arrest.

Guided mountaineering is not the only Sierra sport being severely impacted by insurance problems. Horse packers, river raft outfitters, and heli-skiers, among other federal land concessioners, have found themselves with varying degrees of insurance trouble. While some have found it possible to operate normally, others may face a forced cutback in operations, while some others may have to suspend operation for the coming season entirely.

Sierra Alpine ski areas were also hit by the liability insurance crisis this past ski season. While ski areas found policies available, their premium rates increased at enormous rates, in some cases as high as 1,000%, while the coverage they received was reduced. The cost of insurance is cited by ski areas as the main reason for sizable increases in

The symbol of the American Professional Mountain Guides Assoc.

lift ticket prices over the last five years.

For consumers, the insurance crisis may mean that they may find their favorite Sierra sport no longer available this season, or that the price has increased dramatically. For local economies, the effect could be very serious. If outdoorsmen and women cancel sporting trips to the Sierra, a portion of the tourist dollars normally pumped into the local economy will be lost.

The insurance crisis is of course not only a local problem but a national one, well covered by the national media. The controversial subject has been hotly debated in recent months. Most often in the news in California has been the plight of municipalities which have been severely impacted by their inability to get liability coverage.

In the Sierra, mountaineering guides have been one of the groups most severely affected. "We're holding our breaths, waiting to see what happens," John Fischer says. "There's a lot of uncertainty for us and also for our clients. For a lot of small guide services, it's put them in economic peril."

The mountaineers have been very active in seeking a solution. The Eastern Sierra Mountain Guides, a local chapter of the American Professional Mountain Guides Association, was formed primarily in response to the insurance dilemma. While looking everywhere for insurance, the guides also sought a waiver of the insurance requirement from the federal government, without success. Doug Robinson, member of the Eastern Sierra Mountain Guides and President of the APMGA, said this spring, "We are very disappointed with the National Park Service and the Forest Service for refusing to recognize the bind we're in. We're forced out of our usual role of helping to protect their visitors, and can't be responsible for the increase of accidents this summer."

Earlier this year, the guides, specifically Fischer and Alan Pietrasanta of Buttermilk Mountain Works in Bishop, organized a national mountaineering guides' conference in Las Vegas. On the panel were representatives of the Forest Service, the National Park Service, and the insurance industry, as well as the President of the American Alpine Club, Jim Whitaker, and two former presidents of that organization, Robert Craig and Nick Clinch. In attendance were guides from Washington, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Alaska, among other areas, as well as representatives of outdoor equipment manufacturers like Patagonia, Chouinard, and Adventure 16, Inc.

The goal of the conference was to find at least a temporary solution to the problem in time for the coming season. Although a dialogue among the principal actors in the situation was achieved, and national attention was drawn to the problem, no solution was directly reached.

Robinson took the opportunity to emphasize the unfair and arbitrary nature of the situation. Using statistics to point out the low rate of injury on guided climbs, especially when compared to amateur climbing, he summed up by citing his own experience as an example: "In nearly 20 years of guiding, I've defended my clients so well against the hazards of the mountains, they've had not a single injury worse than a sprained ankle. And yet, I can't get any liability insurance."

The insurance problems of the California ski industry are of a different nature, but are being regarded with equal seriousness. The Sierra Ski Areas Association, which includes such member groups as Mammoth Mountain, Heavenly Valley, Kirkwood, and Alpine Meadows, met several times last year to discuss ways of dealing with the enormous increases in their insurance premiums.

Lift ticket prices have risen steadily over the last five years, an average of about 30% in California. A lift ticket at Alpine Meadows, for example, which cost $19 in 1981, costs $26 today. The ski areas explain that price increases have been made necessary by rising insurance costs. Pam Murphy, Director of Marketing for Mammoth Mountain, says, "There are two ways that it affects us. Everyone's deductible pretty much across the industry went up, and in blanket coverage, we're not getting as much. So we're losing at both ends—we're paying more for insurance, but getting less coverage."

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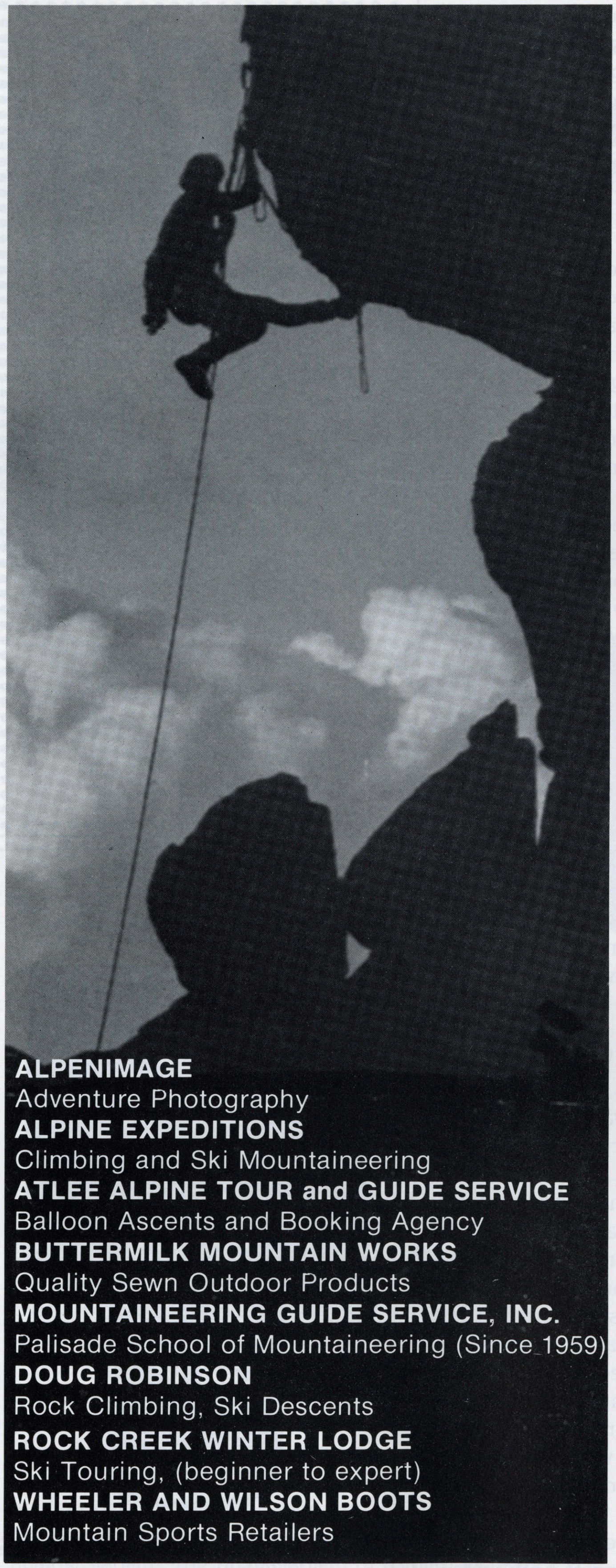

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the ski areas about pricing skiers out of the market. Tim Cohee, Director of Marketing for Heavenly Valley, says, "The effect on the ski industry is pretty drastic. We are in a competitive market with other sports. People are very price sensitive these days, and there is a point where an increase in ticket price *has* to have an effect. Not as many people will ski at $26 as will at $24. So for us to pass along an expense like (insurance rate increases) makes it tougher for us to do business. Virtually any increase we make goes to pay for insurance."

Some ski areas have begun discount skier programs to try to offset the price increases for the price-conscious skier. Heavenly, for example, has a special program where skiers pay a one-time charge of $25, and then can purchase lift tickets for $16 a day, as long as they enter from the area's Nevada side.

In an attempt to reduce their liability, and hopefully their premium rates, many ski areas in California (and the rest of the U.S.) have instituted "safe skier" programs. Among the programs which have been tried are increases in the number of patrolmen in congested areas, advertising the safe skiing concept, and instituting special "reckless skier" programs. "Everyone has a program to deal with reckless skiers now," Cohee says. "You stop them, you pull their ticket, some areas make them view a safety film and then give them a different colored ticket to show that they've been warned."

"Mammoth Mountain firmly believes in educating skiers," Pam Murphy says. "Mogul Mike is a character we have to make the safe skiing idea more accessible to skiers. We have Mogul Mike films, coloring books, posters and pins; he's part of a campaign to teach safer skiing."

The causes of the insurance crisis are complex and controversial. The insurance industry and trial lawyers have tended to point fingers at each other as being the cause of the problem. Other analysts place blame in both camps, finding that the problem lies in a complicated series of interactions between insurance companies and the legal system.

In the insurance industry's scenario, raising premium rates and eliminating policies for higher risk groups has been made necessary primarily by lawyers and the legal system. They point to large increases in the number of personal injury claims because of an increasingly litigious public, and also note big jumps in the size of personal injury judgements because of sympathetic judges and soft-hearted juries. The industry often points to a doctrine called joint and several liability, now commonly known as 'deep pockets,' which is law in many states, including California. Joint and several liability means that if a plaintiff sues several defendants, and more than one are found to be at fault to some degree, those with the greatest ability to pay may be forced to pay as much as the entire judgement, regardless of their degree of fault. For example, if one skier is hit from behind by a reckless skier and injured, he may sue the reckless skier and the ski area where the accident occurred. If a large judgement for damages is awarded in court, and the reckless skier is found to be 99% at fault and the ski area 1%, but the skier has no assets, the ski area can be held liable to pay the entire judgement, regardless of their small degree of fault. Insurance companies say that since the insured party is often by definition the one with the "deepest pockets," the companies frequently end up paying the judgements. They also point to lawyers who file frivolous lawsuits on a contingency fee basis, which the companies feel forced to settle out of court for appreciable amounts, because of the threat of a much larger damage award.

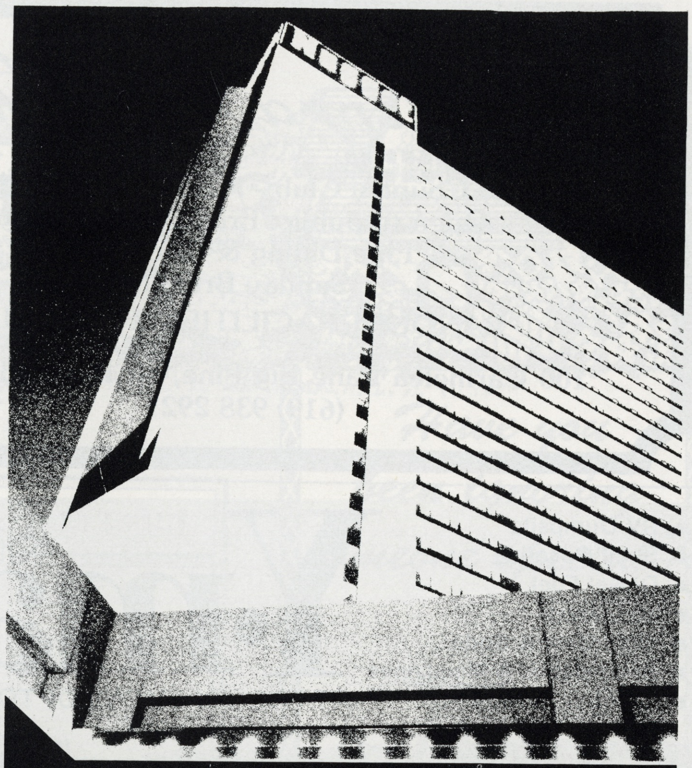
Danny Lee, of the Western Insurance Information Service, says, " 'Insurance Crunch' I think is much too simplistic a term. The insurance crunch is simply the tip of a very large problem, that will only be solved by tort (law) reform. We will have to do something about the court system, and the idea of the deep pocket which insurance companies supposedly have."

The industry further claims that because of the combination of "deep pockets" and a tendency toward large personal injury awards, a party's liability has become basically unpredictable. While insurance companies used to base premium rates on actuarial tables, now they must base them on 'potential,' or "by making a wild guess and hoping you're right," according to one insurance industry spokesman.

Other groups, most notably trial lawyers, dispute the insurance industry's assessment of the crisis. They contend that the root of the problem lies in the underwriting practices of insurance companies in past years. When interest rates were high, they say, insurance companies scrambling to acquire investment income wrote many underpriced policies. When the investment market turned sour in the mid-80's, the companies were caught in a squeeze, and raised premium rates to make up for lost profits, while policies for customers perceived as high-risk were dropped altoghether. Mammoth Lakes attorney and APMGA counsel Paul Rudder says, "Insurance companies are used to, and only comfortable with, experiencing enormous profits. When you threaten those enormous profits, and when claims bring those profits down to what other industries would call normal, the insurance company screams loudly. They want to make, not just regular profits, but tremendous profits."

About insurance companies' complaints of huge increases in the number and size of personal injury judgements, Rudder says, "That's industry propaganda. The fact is, the costs in that area have increased at a reasonable rate compared with the increasing cost of everything else. The insurance industry is trying to create the impression that something has gotten out of hand—"runaway claims," "tremendous jury verdicts,"—that's baloney. It hasn't happened."

Whatever the cause of the crisis, the majority of solutions being proposed are in the area of tort reform. Over a hundred various bills have been introduced in the California state legislature in response to the insurance situation, including one by state Senator H.L. Richardson which would establish a penalty for attorneys who file frivolous lawsuits. Advocates of tort reform legislation, including Richardson, complain that lobbying in Sacramento by the powerful California Trial Lawyers Association has



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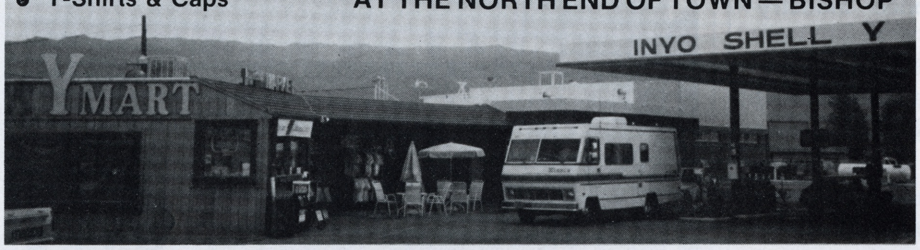

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consistently blocked passage of legislative remedies.

Frustration over the lack of legislative measures coming from Sacramento led tort reform proponents to place on the California ballot Proposition 51, a controversial initiative to limit defendants' liability in non-economic, "pain and suffering" damage awards to each defendant's percentage of blame, an elimination of the deep pockets doctrine.

Other tort reform measures often discussed are the establishment of a 'cap' on non-economic damage awards, as California has already done in the area of medical malpractice cases, and limiting the amount of lawyers' contingency fees.

Trial lawyers and consumer groups have argued firmly against Proposition 51 and other tort reforms. Contending that insurance company practices are responsible for the insurance mess, they point out that in all the proposed tort reform legislation or in Proposition 51, there is not one word *requiring* insurance companies to lower their rates. They point to examples like Iowa, Pennsylvania, and Ontario, Canada, where various kinds of tort reform laws have been enacted, yet rates have still skyrocketed and some groups still find policies unavailable. Tort reform opponents say that even if all the tort reform measures being sought in California were enacted, they wouldn't expect insurance companies to voluntarily lower their rates or make insurance more available. Instead, many recommend government regulation of the insurance companies, or elimination of the insurance industry's exemption from federal antitrust laws, as possible answers to the problem.

President Reagan has recently gotten involved in the insurance question. He is expected to endorse federal legislation which could include limiting lawyers' contingency fees in damage cases, and putting a $100,000 cap on non-economic damages, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

For the worst victims of the insurance crisis, like Sierra mountaineering guides, there are no real remedies currently available. Self insurance, or pooling financial resources to set up a fund to insure themselves, has been discussed, but the guides' group is too small and the amount of their self-insurance potential falls far short of federal requirements. One policy for guiding mountaineering has been found, but it also fails to meet federal standards. At present, outlaw guiding is their only alternative. "Nobody's cutting us any slack on the government side, and we're completely stuck on the insurance side," Doug Robinson says.

John Fischer continues to search for an adequate policy or for a federal government waiver, or at least, a compromise. "Talk to me next week," he says, "something may change. At least, I hope it changes." □

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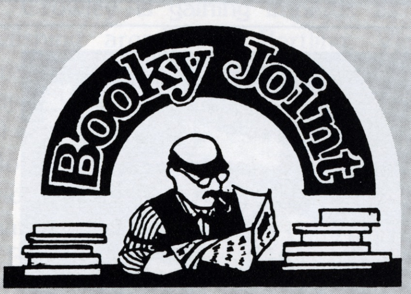

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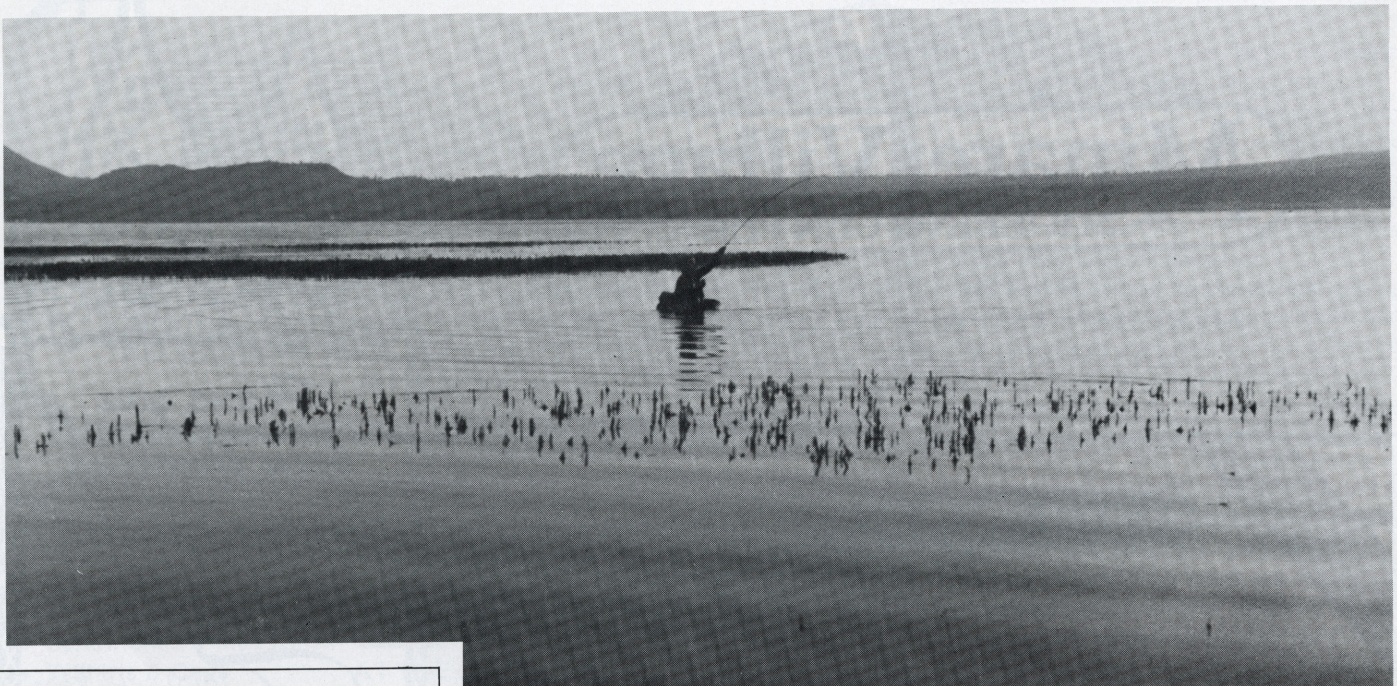

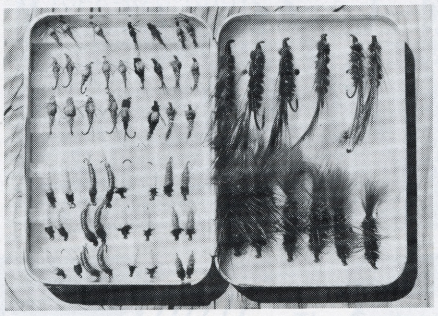

Crowley Lake FLYFISHING

by Marty Forstenzer
Photos by Fred Rowe

When people talk about flyfishing in the West, names like the Madison River in Montana and Henry's Fork in Wyoming usually come up. Recently, a new name has been added to the list of top spots—Crowley Lake off Highway 395 near Mammoth. The Eastern Sierra lake has been gaining recognition as one of the premier flyfishing spots in the West, and some call it one of the top spots anywhere.

Until recently, Crowley has probably been best known for the huge throngs of spin fishermen it attracts for each year's season opener. That weekend, hundreds of fishermen line the shoreline, elbow to elbow, and boats jam the lake's surface. Now, largely because of an extended season with new regulations for the extended portion, increasing numbers of flyfishermen are being drawn to try the Mono County lake.

Crowley's trout season, which used to run from opening day until July 31, will for the second year in a row be extended until October 31. After July 31, though, only single, barbless hooks are allowed, there is an eighteen-inch minimum size requirement, and the limit is reduced from seven to two. "We call it the second season," says Dick Dahlgren, President of the Eastern Sierra-based Mammoth Fly Rodders. "The regulations after July 31 make it pretty much geared for flyfishing."

It's no exaggeration to call Crowley

one of the nation's top flyfishing waters, judging from last year's reviews. The California Department of Fish & Game distributed questionnaires to fishermen at the lake after July, and were surprised by the degree of positive response. "This is the greatest thing since sex," one obviously impressed fisherman wrote. Other responses included: "I'm cancelling my trip to Yellowstone," "the flyfishing rivals that found in Montana and Wyoming," and "a tremendous new addition to California flyfishing."

"Crowley is gaining impetus as a flyfishing area," Jim Bartling, Vice President of Mammoth Fly Rodders, says. "We have people who have fished all of the famous places in the West, in Montana, in Idaho, Utah, up in Alaska, and they come back to Crowley and say that it's right up there."

Bartling, an aerospace industry dropout who has lived in the Eastern Sierra for 15 years, has worked at Filson's Sporting Goods in Mammoth since 1974, and is recognized as one of the area's top flyfishing experts. "We're very excited about Crowley," he says. "By July, you have an average rainbow of 1 1/2- to 3-pounds, and they fight like heck. The brown trout don't fight as much, but they can get bigger. One guy caught a 9-pound brown on a fly rod at Crowley last year; the browns can range between 4 and 9 pounds."

Dahlgren says, "You aren't going to get the numbers of 18-inch trout anywhere as you get at Crowley. I've never caught fish anywhere that fought as hard. You can get "spooled" there; I burned up a Shakespeare fly reel on a two-pound rainbow. And we all know about the bigger fish, like the 26-

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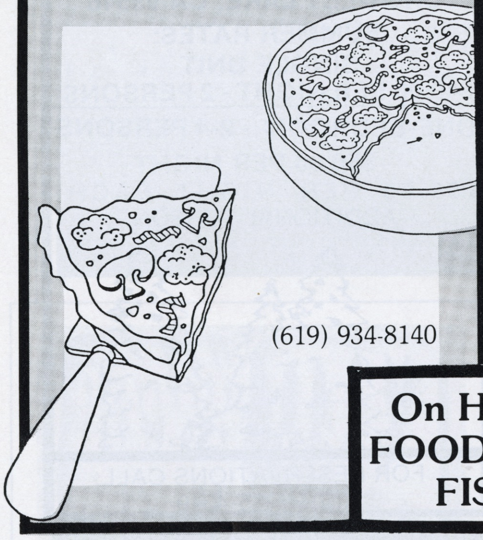

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pounder that was caught there years back."

Some of the lake's unique conditions are the reason for the large size of Crowley's trout, according to Department of Fish & Game Fisheries Biologist Darrell Wong. "Crowley really is a very productive water. It's basically a flooded meadow, with a lot of shallow water. A lot of sunlight comes into the shallow water, and there are also a lot of nutrients coming into the lake. That promotes algae growth, which produce a lot of zooplankton, and so on up the food chain." Wong, who recently returned from a fishing vacation in New Zealand, adds, "You'd be damned hard put to find flyfishing in New Zealand better than Crowley's." The Eastern Sierra lake has been compared favorably with world famous waters in Chile and Argentina.

Bartling recommends wading the shallow water along the Crowley shoreline, especially in Owens and McGee Bays. "You've got to be careful and sneak up on them; stealth is important. Sometimes, though, the fish are so intent on feeding, that they don't pay any attention to you unless you make a sudden movement. You can cast above them, and they'll pick it up."

Float tubing has become popular at Crowley, because of the tubes' deeper water capability and easy mobility. Using float tubes, Crowley fishermen move into the lake's river channel, or fish weedy boundaries or potholes in weeds where trout like to feed. As far as conditions go, the prime flyfishing period at Crowley is between late May and September, when the trout-attracting weed beds develop.

For the most part, flyfishermen at Crowley practice "catch and release" fishing. Bartling estimates that 90% of the trout caught at the lake by flyfishermen are released.

The Mammoth Fly Rodders recommend an eight to ten foot fly rod, and at least six pound break strength tapered leader, especially for fishing baitfish imitations. Four pound break strength leaders can be used with a dry fly, "but expect your share of breakoffs," they say. All types of flyfishing lines are used at Crowley for different situations, including floating, sink tip, "shooting heads," and slow, fast and extra-fast sinking lines. Also recommended are Polaroid sunglasses, which reduce glare and enable fishermen to see fish below the surface.

Four basic flies which Bartling recommends for Crowley Lake include the Olive Matuka, a "bread and butter" wet fly, the Male Adams dry fly, the Elk Hair Caddis, and the Lake Mary Special, a local variation on the Mosquito. Dahlgren adds to that list one of his favorites, "Doc's Twin Lake Special."

As any flyfisherman knows, the object is to "match the hatch," or present an authentic looking imitation of whatever insects or baitfish the fish are feeding on. Bartling comments that some flyfishermen go to the extreme of raising insects at home in an aquarium in order to study them, so as to be better able to tie and present more authentic looking flies.

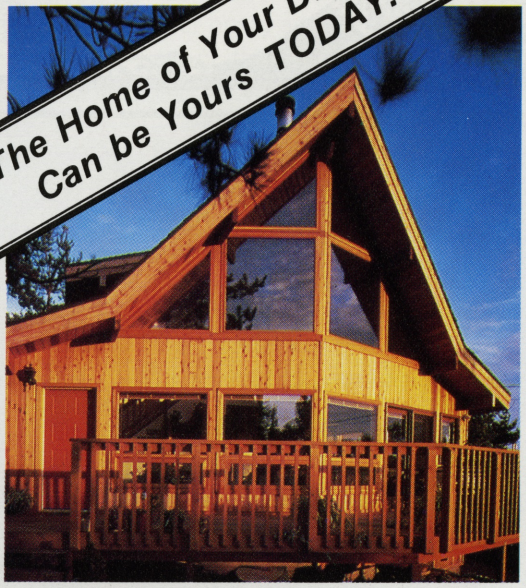
Among the most common insects imitated at Crowley are various stages of midges or gnats, and of mayflies. There are numerous midge imitations used; the Olive Matuka is a good mayfly imitation. Other common insects at Crowley are the mosquito, often imitated, and the damselfly, for which the Olive Marabou Damsel is an imitation.

To a lesser extent, caddisflies and stoneflies are present where the river or creeks empty into the lake. Ants and grasshoppers are sometimes blown from shore into the lake, providing trout with a meal.

The fry of rainbows, suckers, chubs, and Sacramento perch are present at various times during the summer, and imitations of these can provoke a vigorous strike. Bartling suggests wading the shoreline and watching for surface disturbances followed by a wake (representing fry attempting to evade an attacking predator), and casting into the disturbance.

Spin fishermen also have had good success with flies at Crowley. The common setup is a fly on a bubble completely or partially filled with water, with from four to six feet of leader.

Bartling says of fishing at Crowley, "Opening day is for bait fishermen; it's their time. For flyfishermen, our time comes after that— but then we have the rest of the season to enjoy it. ☐



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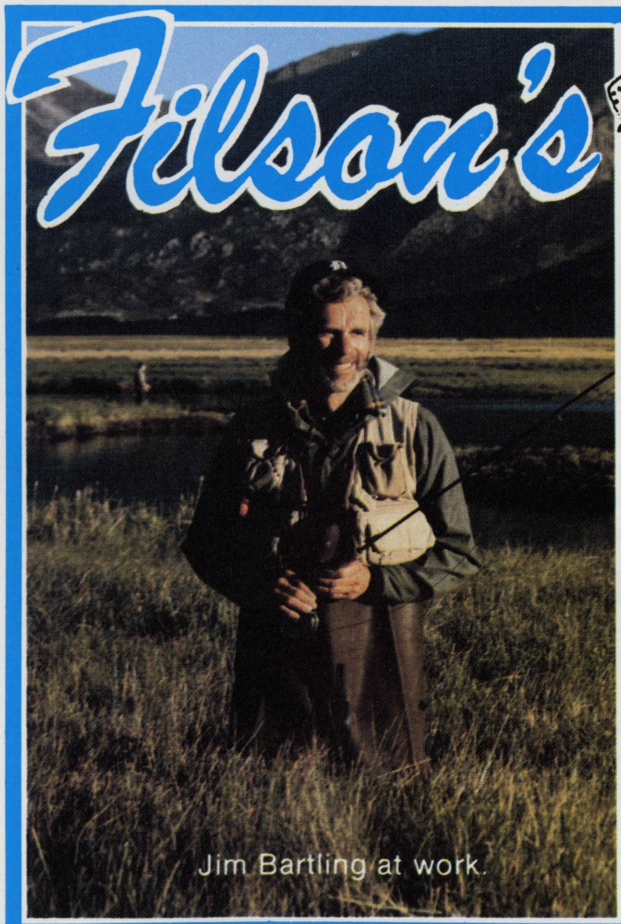

Jim Bartling at work.

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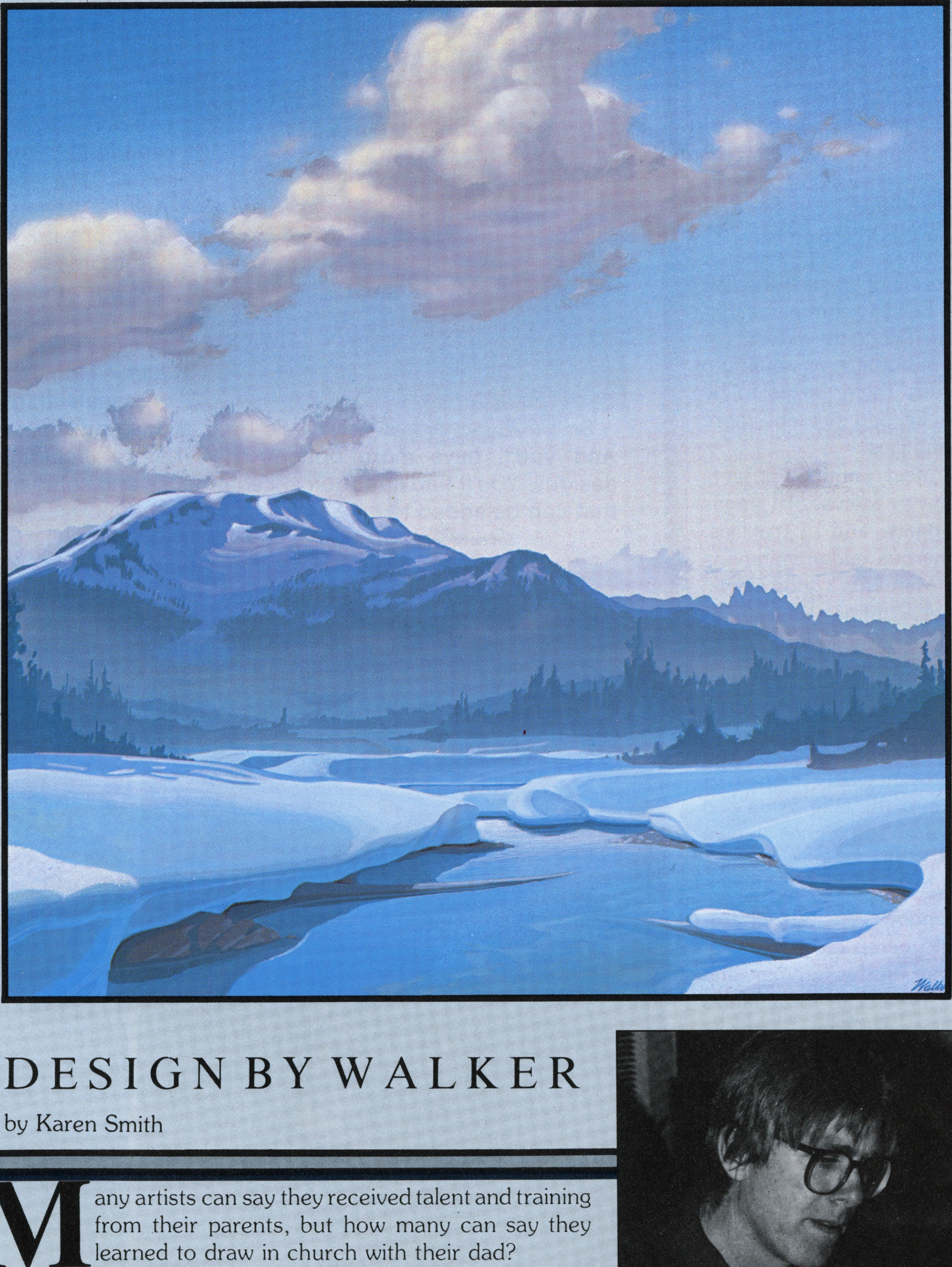
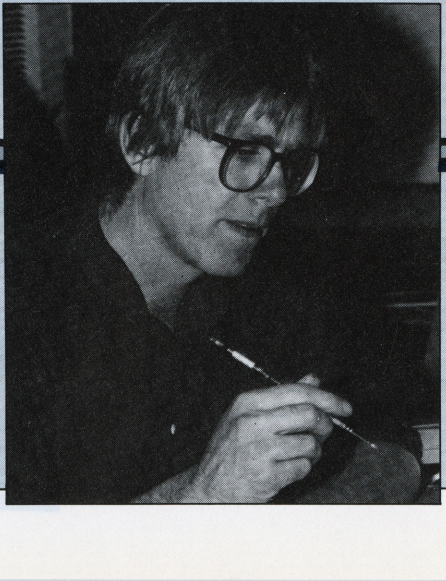


DESIGN BY WALKER

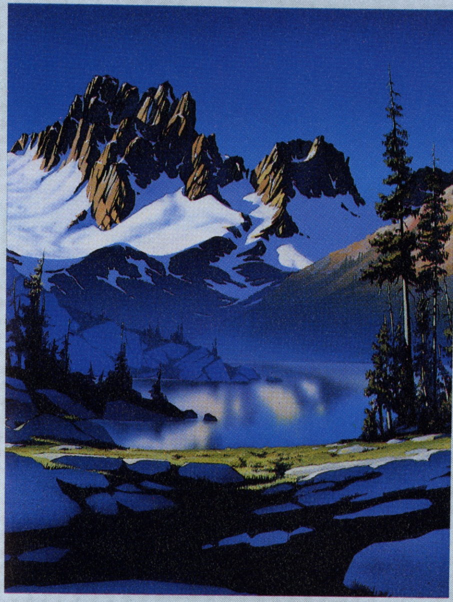
by Karen Smith



Many artists can say they received talent and training from their parents, but how many can say they learned to draw in church with their dad? Mammoth Mountain Ski Area Art Director Larry Walker can.

"When the sermon started, Dad would get out a piece of paper and draw something, then hand it to me and I'd try to copy it," Walker said recently in his office at the ski area's Main Lodge. Casually dressed in jeans, polo shirt and sweater, the boyishly handsome Walker laughs at the memory. As he tells the story, it's easy to imagine him concentrating more on trying to outdraw his father than on listening to a Sunday service.

The game later evolved to Larry drawing first, then seeing what Dad could come up with. "It was always 'mine's going to be better than yours,'" he remembers of the friendly competition.



He doesn't let on to what the church's minister—or his mother, also an artist—thought of the arrangement, but Walker obviously learned something.

The 34-year-old artist has lived in Mammoth for 14 years, the past 10 spent in the ski area's Graphics Department. His sketches and acrylic paintings have adorned countless Mammoth Mountain brochures, and his sense of color and eye for clarity have helped decorate the ski area's buildings and create its many signs.

Ron Sachs, owner of Minaret Gallery in Mammoth, says of Walker, "I think maybe Larry has been overlooked by some of the people in this area, as far as his workmanship, and the quality of his work. Who else is here who's better at what Larry does? Nobody. He's unique here."

Walker has turned recently to painting scenics for clients, and is currently working on a three-painting series of Yosemite scheduled to be reproduced as postcards and stationery. El Capitan and Half Dome are two of the scenes, with the third yet to be decided.

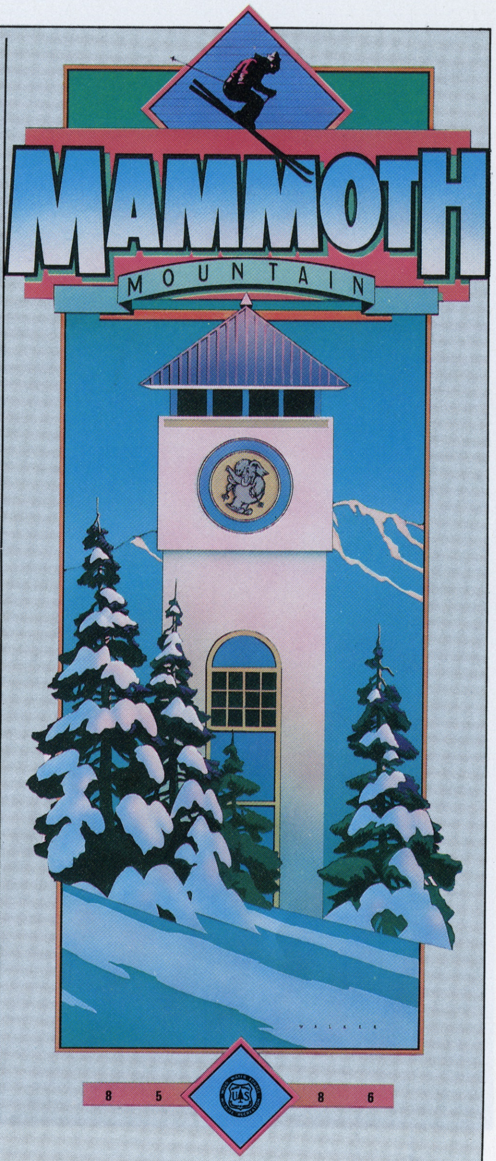
While filling a visitor in on his background, Walker busily added trees to the foreground of the Half Dome scene, working quickly and deftly, and seemingly from memory. He explains that he uses some aids on occasion. "I do look in magazines and books a lot, then try to throw my own two cents worth into the scene. I interpret it through my own eyes. It's important to me to get the colors right."

Blue dominates his acrylics, pulling together that peculiar Sierra phenomenon of sky meeting water or shadowy snow in an endless circle. The yellow-green of alpine meadows and the multi-hued browns of craggy rock are there as well, staving off the coldness often associated with artworks steeped in cyan. "I'm not sure I could say it's my favorite color," he says, "I just see a lot of it in the world. Almost everything I do seems to come out that way (blue)."

Maxfield Parrish, who did many illustrations for Life Magazine and other publications during his long career, was also fond of blue. Walker said that Parrish remains an influence on his selection of color in general. The great photographer Ansel Adams is also an inspiration. "The way Adams captured light in black and white really opened my eyes," Walker said of the late chronicler of California's varied scenery.

He thinks it's important for artists to look at the work of others, to see how they perceive the world. "I can't see being sheltered and not looking at other artists' work. I like to be up on what's new in design and color, and to see what influences others. Then I throw in my interpretations, and hopefully it comes out looking like Walker did it."

His biggest influence, though, remains his parents. "I probably got the biggest part of my training from them. I think I was destined from about the third grade on to be an artist. I was always nominated for painting backdrops for plays and that sort of thing."



Growing up in Eagle Rock, California and attending Glendale College, he also acquired a taste for the mountains from his parents. Mammoth was a frequent vacation spot in his childhood, and he remembers drawing the mountains when he came to visit.

Walker has always considered himself an "illustrator"—beginning with pencil, and gravitating towards pastels and then paint as he got older. He has also tried sculpture and carving, but is less comfortable with those forms.

One particular legacy from his parents, who still live in Eagle Rock, is the "open critique," which is practiced daily in the Mammoth Mountain Graphics Department. "Before I went to bed at night, Dad would bring something out of the studio and put it up on the mantel and ask Mom what she thought. I would later add my opinion, and I've since thrived on an open forum. It's really valuable to an artist."

continued on page 70

sierra

This issue's inside front cover, the photo above and the one on page 70 are from a book of photographs and writings called SIERRA SUNRISE: *Along the John Muir Trail* by Jim and Lynn Wilson. The authors live in Yosemite National Park, where Jim Wilson works at the Ansel Adams Gallery as staff photographer.

The book's introduction explains that after the Wilsons were married, "tragedy struck. Lynn contracted multiple sclerosis, and was told she would never walk again. Refusing to accept that verdict, Lynn. . . began a strenuous workout program. After eleven years of therapy, she was well enough to begin wilderness hiking. By 1984, Lynn and Jim were ready for what had become their life goal: to hike the John

sunrise

by Jim and Lynn Wilson

Muir Trail in its entirety."

Over the course of that hike, the Wilsons kept a photographic record which became SIERRA SUNRISE. The book contains striking color photography of the Sierra from the length of the Trail. Also included are some of the Wilsons' impressionistic writings, as well as brief sections about the history, geology, botany and wildlife of the Sierra Nevada. ☐

SIERRA SUNRISE: Along the John Muir Trail *may be purchased in many Eastern Sierra stores, or by mail from:*
Sunrise Productions
P.O. Box 521
Yosemite National Park, CA 95389
$8.95 paperbound, plus $1.50 for postage and handling.

photo from Sierra Sunrise by Jim and Lynn Wilson

Larry Walker continued

Now Walker and his four staff artists—his team, he likes to say—look over everyone's ideas for brochures, signs and the like, and pick the best. Sometimes bits and pieces of a couple of the staffers' ideas are combined. "If everybody's behind it, it gives encouragement to us all," he says.

The department is striving to give Mammoth Mountain a "total look" that is colorful but gets information across. "We want to make everything very functional, very attractive, but make it really belong in an alpine setting. Function definitely comes first, but looks are important."

Of the future, Walker says, "I hope to work as a painter, doing nothing but landscapes, and boil down everything I've learned into that. There are so many things I'd like to do landscape-wise: the Sierra, seascapes, rolling hills. There are a lot of beautiful things all over the state. I'd like to paint them all."

Living in Mammoth, in the heart of the Sierra Nevada is certainly an inspiration, Walker said. "I like to watch sunrises, sunsets, changes in shadows. It feeds my memory bank and I rely on that a lot when I paint. When I go for a walk I always look for new views."

He's using some of those "memory bank" images in freelance work now, such as the Yosemite series. As trees continued to materialize from under his brush, Walker often paused to take stock, as if in his mind's eye Half Dome was in front of him, not a hundred miles away. It's clear though, that the commercial artist isn't out of his system yet. "Being a commercial artist is a way to always keep my hand on a brush or pencil and work with creative people, and make my living that way," he says.

Are the genes there for a third-generation Walker artist? Son Matthew, 8, has shown some ability of which Larry and wife Mary are proud, but it's like father, like son in another area too. "He'd like to be an athlete too, just like me; I enjoy playing softball and skiing. Being an athlete and staying in shape is almost as important to me as art."

In the meantime, he'll concentrate on making sure skiers and non-skiers alike get clear information from ski area signs, and enjoy the harmonious greens, blues, reds and tans beginning to cover the facilities at Mammoth. Whatever he does in the future, his influence on Mammoth will likely remain as a lasting monument. ☐

Karen Smith is the Eastern Sierra correspondent for the Reno Gazette-Journal.

From the Publisher

I'm not a liberal or a conservative. I suppose that puts me somewhere in the middle. . . trying to draw my ideals from the best of both.

I despise extremism in any form, whether it be to the left or right of the political spectrum.

There is a "mood" emerging in our society today that scares me to death. It's the most dangerous form of extremism, and it's called "self-righteous indignation."

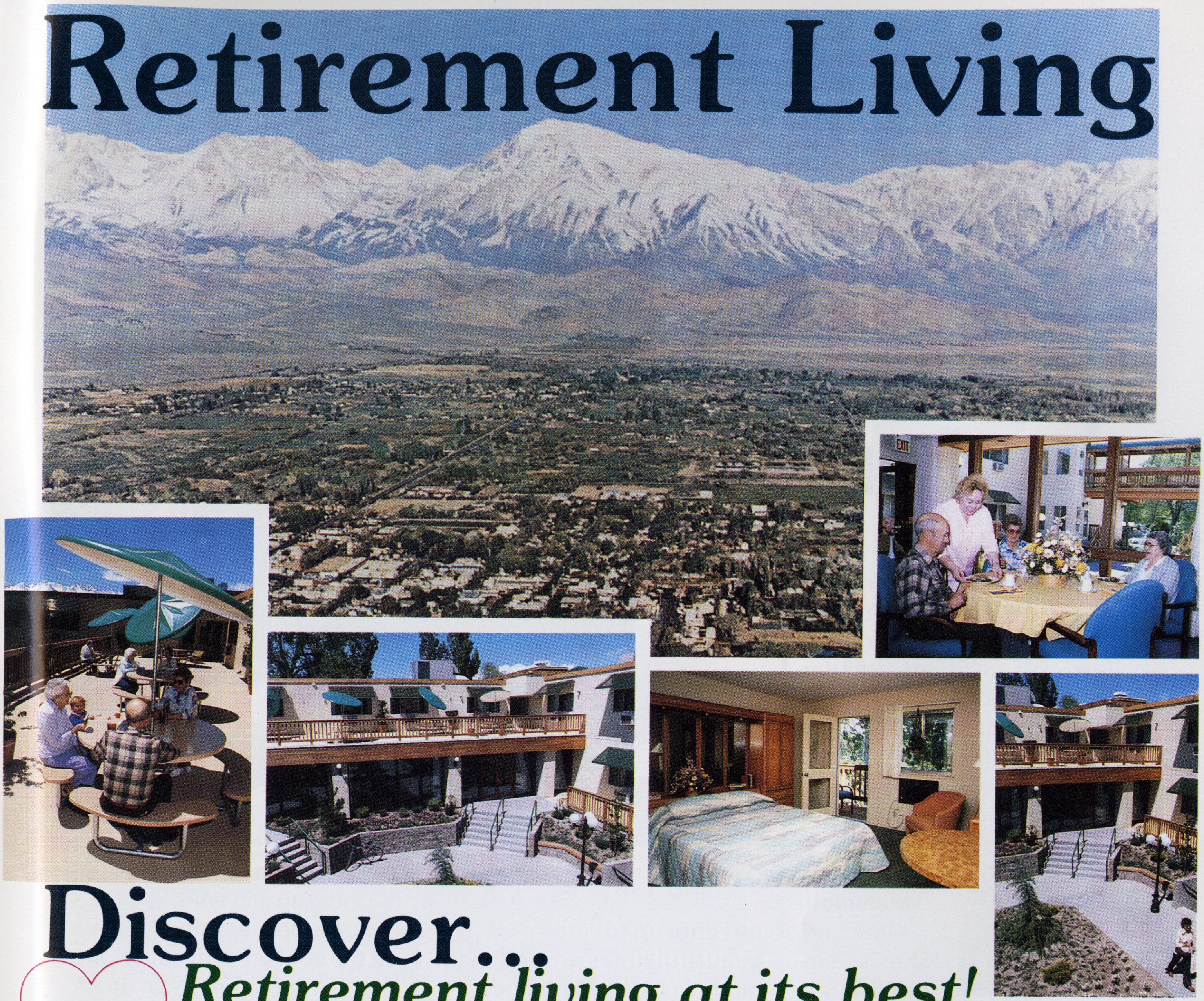
We can easily recognize the self-righteous indignant. This is the person who sits in judgement of his fellow man, who slanders, libels, or just makes life miserable for one who didn't happen to squeeze in before the doors of the indignant's mind slammed shut.

Self-righteous indignation burns crosses on front lawns and sends innocent people to concentration camps. It's an ugly, dangerous way of thinking, and if we allow it to become "justified" we are all in danger of becoming its victim.

We, as a society, have the power to encourage or discourage this kind of thinking. I hope we choose the latter.

Sandie Pramann
Publisher

Retirement Living



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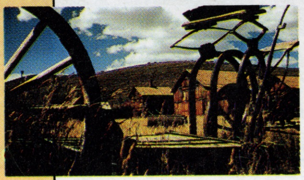

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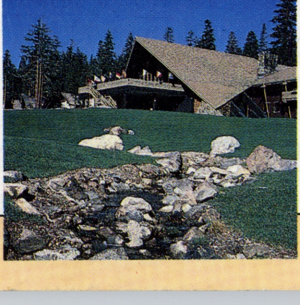
The Inn is the starting point for the shuttle bus to Devil's Postpile National Monument and Red's Meadow. Be sure to visit Rainbow Falls.



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